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OCTOBER 2015

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### FABIAN CANCELLARA

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OCTOBER 2015

# velo

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ON THE COVER: World champion Mathieu van der Poel  
PHOTO: ©kramon

THIS PAGE: Tour of Qatar, with Doha in the background  
PHOTO: Tim De Waele

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# OFF THE FRONT

## HE'S BACK

With a stunning, long-range sprint victory in Steamboat Springs on stage 1 of the USA Pro Challenge, it was clear that Taylor Phinney (BMC Racing) had returned. After battling through a long recovery from a devastating leg injury suffered in 2014, the 25-year-old proved his mettle in the sprint, blasting up the left side in the final few hundred meters.

"It was special and emotional. It's that electric moment we all live for," Phinney said. "I've had 15 months thinking about what it'd be like to put my hands up in the air."

PHOTO BY DOUG PENSINGER/GETTY IMAGES





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## SIGN IN

## Youth development



THE FIRST ORGANIZED SPORT I PLAYED WAS FOOTBALL. It wasn't for me. Nor was basketball. My mother soon realized that ball sports weren't my thing. But she also saw that I still needed an athletic outlet, so she signed me up for a junior swim team. That worked. I had a coach who taught me the pleasures and benefits of hard work—hours-long, two-a-day-practice hard work—and who finally got me to accept the fact that, as much as I wanted the glory of the sprint events, I was a distance guy.

I was a competitive swimmer through high school, when I started life-guarding. This was in the mid-1980s, and my boss, Sean, was obsessed with the booming sport of triathlon. I eventually bought a bike and, with Sean's patient guidance, learned about drafting and cadence and why those expensive Campy Delta brakes were totally going to be worth it. After a couple of triathlons, I decided bikes—and bikes alone—were going to be my thing.

Without my mom's insights, I would have spent much of my childhood sitting on a bench while my more talented teammates sent balls through hoops. Without my swim coach, I wouldn't have realized that I was best suited for endurance pursuits. And without Sean, I might never have transferred all of that into cycling, which has been the defining athletic pursuit of my life.

We all need mentors, and we all are mentors. Every time I see a little kid on a bike—which happens almost daily here in Boulder—I make a point of shouting “nice work” or “cool bike” as I ride by. The grins they flash back are a great reward, but so is my suspicion that those little interactions will stick with them—filed away in the bank of experiences that will hopefully turn them into lifelong cyclists.

Likewise, I know that whenever I ride past another cyclist in a hurry, or yell at a motorist, or am anything other than helpful and supportive of some newbie on a group ride, I'm giving someone a reason to shun our sport.

Every time we're on a bike—and even a lot of times when we're not—we're ambassadors for cycling. That's why I love Pearl Izumi's new Endure and Enjoy pact ([thepact.pearlizumi.com](http://thepact.pearlizumi.com)). Among the gems it contains: “I will encourage the beginner, the professional, and everyone in between. I will place joy above performance, use my fingers for peace, not profanity, and I will focus on the scenery more than the scene.”

This issue's opening feature, starting on page 30, is about how Axel Merckx has become arguably the best developer of young cycling talent in North America. His Axeon development team dominates the domestic U23 field. A full third of his riders have gone onto the WorldTour. And, to his surprise, Merckx has found that he takes more joy from his young riders' victories than he did from his own.

His success as a mentor, and his unexpected passion for it, have crossed over from a neat post-racing job into something bigger, something existential. Racing was something he did; his new career seems to be who he is.

We won't all see mentorship as a calling. But that doesn't change the fact that we are all ambassadors for cycling and that we all have frequent opportunities to turn people toward or away from our sport.

Every time you don't consciously do the former, you run the risk of doing the latter. So please choose wisely.

*John Bradley*

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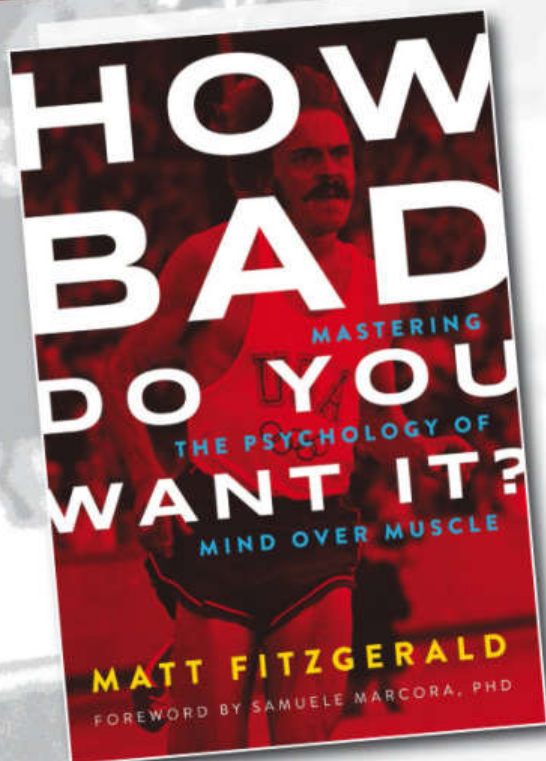
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The inside line on the world of competitive cycling

# VELONOTES»

## 'Cross conundrum

Despite a booming domestic scene, the country has been without a national pro series since 2012. That needs to change—and the fix would be easy.

BY SPENCER POWLISON



### LONELY ROAD

Including so many races in the Pro CX series has diluted the strength of the competition, making the battle for the title a function of who travels the most.

Forget, for a moment, that cyclocross participation in the U.S. has grown 40 percent in the last five years. Ignore the fact that organizers pulled off a successful world championships in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2013. Overlook, also, the fact that Cross Vegas opened the UCI World Cup this year.

Forget all of that. Because despite these high-level successes on American soil, the truth is that, for professionals, our domestic scene is a mess. There is no firm direction or

organization at the top of the sport, and U.S.-based pros and their fans are facing another frustrating season without a consensus national race series.

"The one thing that is working is Pro CX," says Adam Myerson, a race promoter and longtime pro racer. "There are pro-level races somewhere in the country, every weekend."

But the Pro CX calendar—a collection of 45 domestic UCI cyclocross races—doesn't quite deliver on the promise of a true national series.

"I think the Pro CX calendar is a total joke and a waste of time and allocation of money," says two-time U.S. national cyclocross champion Ryan Trebon (Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld.com). "For me, it doesn't make any sense. It's every race. How can you have a calendar of races where you have multiple races every weekend at different parts of the country and expect to have the best racers race each other all the time?"

Even USA Cycling's vice president of national events, Micah Rice, admits there may be too



## THE GOOD OL' DAYS

At the height of its popularity, the U.S. Gran Prix of Cyclocross saw intense battles between the stars of the sport (here, Jeremy Powers and Tim Johnson), duking it out in front of massive crowds.



many events on the Pro CX calendar.

"We wanted to be a little more inclusive than exclusive," Rice says, pointing to the number of C2 races in the U.S. (UCI designations for cyclocross races start with World Cup events at the top, then C1 and C2.) "We wanted to include the promoters that didn't see a reason to run a C1 but wanted to run a C2 and kind of be part of the calendar. We also wanted to push racer participation."

The catch is that, though the Pro CX calendar was never intended to replace the U.S. Gran Prix of Cyclocross (USGP), which faded away after the 2012 season, it has become the de facto series for American pros. So instead of following a clearly defined series and competing against the same top racers at every event, riders are left to pick events from a broad national calendar of all UCI-sanctioned races.

"If people stop looking at the distraction of a series and just look at the calendar, there are plenty of good races out there," Myerson says.

But the problem isn't lack of races; it's lack of structure. With the reliance on the Pro CX calendar, the simple truth is that the \$40,000 purse goes to the riders who travel the most. Jeremy Powers (Aspire Racing) competed in 12 Pro CX races last year and won 10 of those races. But he finished second in points—938 to 989—to Jamey Driscoll (Raleigh-Clement), who raced 26 Pro CX events last season.

"I think it has continued to grow, but I do think it is hard for fans to follow," Powers says of the current calendar. "I do think it hurts when there isn't a national series like the USGP. Of course it does."

The women's calendar yielded a different dynamic, with Caroline Mani (Raleigh-Clement) winning the overall after 19 starts but with just three victories, ahead of Courtenay McFadden (GE Capital-American Classic) who made 23 starts and had one victory. It wasn't exactly a pitched battle for dominance at the front of the field.

"To be able to win that series, you basically have to do every race," says Gabby Durrin (Neon Velo), who finished sixth overall. "I just think it's more quantity over quality."

## VICTIMS OF OUR OWN SUCCESS

When the Supercup started in 1996, cyclocross was a nascent sport in the U.S. There was plenty of leeway for the organizers to dictate the major events on the calendar, up until the series fizzled in 2001. The USGP had similar freedom, starting in 2004, as the curl of the American 'cross wave began to form.

Now, that wave is a monster. In 2005, USA Cycling counted 32,170 cyclocross racer days. Last year, it was 131,042. There simply isn't much room on the crowded calendar for a new series.

"There are a lot of good individual events that stand on their own pretty well and don't necessarily want to be soaked up by a privately owned company," Rice says. "Starting that on a very crowded calendar is very hard."

Trebon, twice winner of the USGP, sees the USAC's collection of license fees as a bit of a disincentive to create a smaller and more cohesive pro series. "As long as they get registration and get people buying licenses, they couldn't give two

shits about professional-level cyclocross," he says.

The simple fix, of course, would be to link the existing C1 races into a standalone series. USAC already favors C1s on the Pro CX calendar by giving those races three times as many points as C2 events. By focusing on those more valuable races, Powers ended up second overall in the series, despite a light domestic schedule.

Such a change would clearly help pros who now fly around the country every autumn. It would also benefit fans by giving them a compelling season-long narrative. But there would be an additional upside in terms of the health of the sport. Sponsorship investment keeps the teams afloat. Having a professional, unified product that compels them to use cyclocross to market their brands is the best way to support the athletes and U.S. cyclocross in general.

"Selling bikes is a business," Trebon says. "Racing bikes is a business. USAC is a business. Why can't race promoting be a business? The USGP was good at production. That's where you could bring sponsors and show them, and they'd see how good it is. Now it's like, 'Is this in someone's backyard?'"

But the two—a pro series and the nation's thriving "backyard" races—aren't mutually exclusive. The latter are both a cause and effect of the boom in domestic cyclocross. But for the long-term viability of pro racing, USAC needs to trim its Pro CX calendar or find a series promoter than can fill the big shoes left empty by the USGP. **V**

Michael Better contributed to this report.





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Sitting In with **Fabian  
Cancellara**

By Chris Case



FABIAN CANCELLARA CLIMBED OFF HIS BIKE AND INTO THE TEAM CAR—another abandoned race. This season, it had become an unfortunate routine.

The Swiss strongman suffered his way through the first road stage at the Vuelta a España, and began stage 3 pale and weak. With 37 kilometers remaining, struggling more than 30 minutes behind the peloton and outside of the time limit, his illness won the battle. Another chance to rebuild form was dashed before it even began.

For Cancellara, it was a continuation of a nightmarish season, forced out of his second straight grand tour only three days in. He abandoned the Tour de France after breaking two vertebrae in a high-speed crash on stage 3. Unbelievably, it wasn't the first time he had broken his back in 2015. In March, he broke two vertebrae at E3-Harelbeke, eliminating him from his season's biggest targets, the cobbled classics.

*Velo* caught up with Cancellara on the eve of his Vuelta start, to discuss his legacy, his frustration over repeated injury, and his status within the peloton.

**After so many ups and downs this season, you must be incredibly frustrated.**

It's not frustration. It was not an easy year. I woke up sick after Oman; I had to take a rest there. Then I crashed at E3 and I had to take a rest. Then in the Tour de Suisse I got sick and I suffered a lot. Then I went to the Tour de France and I won again and I crashed again. That is what is on the table, and I have to live with that. It is definitely not easy. I had some tough times. That is not a secret. An athlete doesn't want to sit in bed looking at the ceiling or lounge outside counting the stars. I want to ride my bike and I want to enjoy and suffer on my bike but not in the way [I've suffered].

**Do the many setbacks you've had this year make you push retirement back another year?**

No, no, no. I am working on it already. [Injuries] could happen next year, it could happen anywhere. What I'm doing now at the Vuelta is not just about what is coming at the end of the year, but it is also important for next year. Crashing out doesn't motivate me more. I have always said I want to stop on the highest level that I can stop, and not just be cruising around. That is not what motivates me.

Another thing: I can choose this by myself, which is also nice. Because in the end, there's always a second life. Cycling is not everything in life. It's always part of my life now, but there is always another part of my life. This I see now, and it is always important to see. Yeah, life could be over in just a couple of seconds like in the Tour. I could not ride my bike and I had to suffer for more months and weeks to get back. I saw fast the reality there, but I think of course the motivation and will are important.

**It's as if you've had three off-seasons and returns this year. How did you do it? It would have been easy to say 'enough' and sit out the rest of the year.**

I had that in mind, but the thing is I am still fresh, still motivated, and I am still ready to go. It might be that [once the Vuelta starts] every-

thing will be different and maybe I will come back to your question and say, 'Hey, you were right. I don't know what the hell I am doing here.' And, mentally, I have to see how fresh and fit I am and how much suffering I can do.

But in the end we are just human. We are not machines. A machine you push a button. We humans have to push the pedals and the brain; the head is all about what's there when you look in the mirror. That's the reality.

The whole year was like this: If I was off the bike I had pain, and when I was on the bike I was suffering and trying to get back in shape. That's why it was a tough year and a harder year than in 2012. In the end, I can't change anything and I can just go on.

**In some ways it's clear you've already begun to think about life after cycling. What do you want your legacy to be?**

For me, what would be nice is for fans to like me how I was. For me to say I was the best here or the best there is not up to me—it's up to the people. I still want to be supported by the people and in the hearts of people, and not to be forgotten as soon as I retire. Yeah, I am not Eddy Merckx. I am me. I never won the Tour de France, and we know the Tour de France is what gives you the biggest exposure. But in the end the Tour de France is not what it is all about. I am me, and that is what it is all about. I'm happy about what I achieved and proud of what I did. And this is what I try to do until the end of riding my bike—to get the best result and be remembered by the people.

**Do you have any regrets about previous world championships?**

Maybe Mendrisio was the world championships I threw away in the end. Mendrisio was the bad one. But in the end I won two classics. So I lost worlds, but on the other hand, is it now good or is it now bad? I saw it afterwards as a positive. It's possible I may never win a world championship, but I have many other wins, so that's better than a rider who may just win the world

championships. Of course I would love to have all the wins I had in my mind, but it's not that easy. And the older I get, the harder it gets.

If I stop cycling and I haven't won worlds, I won't cry. Of course you'll say Fabian hasn't won worlds, but it is what it is. (Cancellara is a four-time world champion in the time trial — Eds.)

**Was the fact that you were wearing the yellow jersey when you crashed on stage 3 of the Tour the only reason you got up and finished?**

I was really hurting. I was in a world of pain but also a world of relief, because if you crash you want to stand up straightaway and go on, especially in this jersey. When we stopped, I said, 'I'm not good.' I felt straightaway this is the same kind of pain I had at the classics. We get up the climb and I went slowly back to the car and asked about some painkillers because I had some really high pain. But they tried to motivate me and keep me up. They said, 'Okay you can stop the race.' But I didn't want to do it with this jersey. You know the jersey helps so much, gives you so much, and I tried to honor it and make it to the finish.

At 75kph, it's not fun to crash out. Some people really didn't believe that it was 75kph. I can be lucky I landed on the grass and not on asphalt. Just go in a car and jump out at 75kph; that's how it feels at this speed. Yeah, it's not fun, but even with the dangers, I am still alive. It's amazing more actually didn't happen.

**In recent years you have become a leader in the peloton, a patron. You've spoken up when things aren't to your satisfaction, when things aren't safe. Is your position as a patron something you enjoy?**

In the end there are situations where I am looking after myself and I am looking after cycling. Sometimes there are situations where it is okay for me, but it is not okay for cycling or for the riders. I am helping and standing up because when you are a leader of a team and you have won some races, people listen. It's not the small riders that have to stand up for other riders. It has to be the bigger riders who win the big races because in the end we [are the ones who] can help in giving back. Of course, politics are not always easy, but if what happened this year in Oman [when a sandstorm threatened the safety of the racers] happened again, I would again stand up. I didn't get shit, but I got comments. Safety first and that is why I was pushing, pushing to find a solution, to find a solution together. It's never an ending; there is always a solution, but we have to find the solution together. This is cycling and when everyone is [being egotistical] we are not going to move forward.





**“People ask me all the time, ‘Why are you coming back? What’s your story?’ At the end of the day, you want to know why? Because I can. I love cycling.”**

— Kristin Armstrong (Twenty16-Sho-Air), on the eve of the Women’s USA Pro Challenge

**“Hey WorldTour: some of you pull some outrageous crap in these races, and you’ve got no right to. Give respect, get respect.”**

— Robin Carpenter (Hincapie Racing), via Twitter, on the tension between WorldTour and domestic teams at the USA Pro Challenge

**“I can’t control other people’s results. He’s a really good mate. He’s the best teammate you could have. But I can’t really let that get in the way.”**

— Rohan Dennis (BMC Racing), when asked if it had crossed his mind that a win at the Pro Challenge would be the biggest result of teammate Brent Bookwalter’s career



**“When a season starts poorly, it finishes worse.”**

— Vincenzo Nibali (Astana), after his Vuelta expulsion for taking unauthorized assistance from his team car on stage 2

**“Things went a little haywire on the climbs. I got dropped, but I made it back. I like to call it a little ‘Davis Phinney special.’”**

— Taylor Phinney (BMC Racing), after winning stage 1 of the USA Pro Challenge





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# Bello autunno

Traditional and tenuous, the fall classics close out the season in a very Italian way *By Ryan Newill*



For all the weeks-long, pink-wrapped glory of May's Giro d'Italia, Italy has only a fleeting relationship with spring's other main events, the classics. Yes, Milano-Sanremo is the longest one-day race on the professional calendar and the first monument of the season. And in only nine editions, Strade Bianche has carved out a spot among races a century more mature. But as prestigious as both races are, they can feel like a prelude to the march back north. The Mediterranean capi and Tuscan hill towns are quickly forgotten once tubular tires hit Belgian cobbles.

Autumn is another story. At the far end of the season, Italy takes center stage as the season's final dramas play out on the southern side of the Alps.

The 110-year-old Il Lombardia is the centerpiece of the fall calendar—the last of the five monuments and the only one not held in spring. Since the UCI moved the world championships from late August to the September-October timeframe in 1995, this race has also become the traditional debut of the rainbow jersey, particularly when the world's course has smiled on the sort of rider who excels on the short, sharp climbs that mark Lombardia's trip around Lago di Como. Two riders, Oscar Camenzind in 1998 and Paolo Bettini in 2006, have managed to parlay their world championship form into

Lombardia wins the following week.

Lombardia is the star, but it is supported by an undercard rich in Italian cycling history and local flavor that is relatively undiluted by the sport's global push. From the week before Lombardia through the following Sunday, northern Italy hosts another five classics ranging from UCI 1.HC to UCI 1.2 status. Their spring analogs—supporting races like the E3-Harelbeke and Dwars door Vlaanderen—have become well known to American audiences, thanks to the rise of live Internet feeds. But due perhaps to end-of-season fan fatigue, or to broader social and economic realities, the smaller Italian classics remain enigmatic.

Four days after the curtain falls on the Richmond worlds, Milano-Torino will open the 2015 Italian fall classics. The modest Thursday timeslot belies the race's significance. It boasts six fewer editions than Liège-Bastogne-Liège—the race known as La Doyenne, and traditionally referred to as the oldest. But Milano-Torino debuted in 1876, 16 years before the Belgian classic, which makes it the oldest race on the professional calendar.

Old age is seldom achieved without change or trauma. Milano-Torino's struggle to gain traction in its earliest years is reflected in the yawning 18-year gap between its first and second editions.

RACE (First Edition)	2015 DATE	RANK
Milano-Torino (1876)	Thursday, Oct. 1	1.HC
Gran Piemonte (1906)	Friday, Oct. 2	1.HC
Il Lombardia (1905)	Sunday, Oct. 4	WT
Coppa Sabatini (1952)	Thursday, Oct. 8	1.1
Giro dell'Emilia (1909)	Saturday, Oct. 10	1.HC
Giro della Romagna (1910)	Sunday, Oct. 11	1.2

Several more years-long hiatuses followed before the race finally picked up momentum in 1913. And like many races, it suffered as Europe and its cyclists fought two world wars. There have been recent challenges, as well. In 1987, organizers uprooted the race from its traditional spring spot ahead of Milano-Sanremo and pushed it to the fall. It moved back in 2005, only to be transplanted again in 2008, when the ascendant Strade Bianche demanded its date. In 2000, the race was canceled due to the Po River flood that killed scores and displaced tens of thousands, and from 2008 through 2011, it was put on ice while organizer Associazione Ciclistica Arona and owner RCS battled over terms.

The renaissance came in 2012. With management issues resolved, organizers revived Milano-Torino and traded the customary flat finale in front of the Fausto Coppi Motovelodromo for two circuits up the five-kilometer, nine percent slopes of the Basilica di Superga climb east of town.

The reintroduction of the brutally steep Muro di Sormano climb to the Giro di Lombardia had a new group of lightweight contenders targeting that monument, and Milano-Torino's newly challenging profile was a perfect tune-up.

The new finish impressed in its debut, when Alberto Contador attacked on the second trip up the Superga to take the first—and still only—one-day win of his career. Fourth-placed Joaquim Rodríguez won his first of two Lombardia titles three days later, while runner up Diego Ulissi, one of Italy's most promising young classics riders, returned to win Milano-Torino the following year.

Whoever wins Milano-Torino this year will have little time to savor the sunset over the Alps. Friday morning brings the start of the Gran Piemonte, which, until 2008, was known as the Giro del Piemonte. Like many of the fall classics, Piemonte has led a challenging existence, particularly during Europe's recent economic troubles.

After a fairly steady run since its start in 1906,



Piemonte first stumbled in 2007, when organizers could not raise enough sponsorship to host the race. It clawed back in 2008 but looked to be finished when it went dormant after the 2012 edition, won by Colombian Rigoberto Urán. But RCS resurrected the race for 2015 as part of its efforts to build a coordinated, sustainable, late-season calendar around Lombardia.

Written on rolling roads and short climbs in the far northern Apennines, Piemonte's history is worth reviving. In 92 editions, Cino Cinelli, Felice Gimondi, and Eddy Merckx all claimed victories there. The great Gino Bartali, standard bearer for a generation of careers bisected by war, won Piemonte three times, twice in the late 1930s and again in 1951, when the race was held in June. In the sprint that brought "Gino the Pious" that final victory, Serse Coppi crashed on the tram tracks of Torino's Corso Casale. He dusted himself off and returned to his hotel but died of a brain hemorrhage several hours later. A monument to Serse stands outside the velodrome named for his older brother, Fausto.

Piemonte's modern history, while financially fraught, is less tragic. Thanks to the hiatus, Urán remains the defending champion. Daniele Beninati has claimed two wins, in 2006 and 2008, and Philippe Gilbert won Piemonte before both of his Lombardia wins in 2009 and 2010.

## LITTLE ITALY

When the WorldTour calendar closes with Lombardia two days later, the non-Italian WorldTour teams and their stars will largely fade away into the off-season, depleted by three grand tours and a mandatory season that began in Australia in January. Those that are left will be split between the Italian races, French season closers Paris-Bourges and Paris-Tours, and a smattering of home-country obligations.

The last Italian races are fought out largely by indigenous second-division teams and the Eastern European squads that have gravitated to Italy since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even without the flash of the big names, though, the end of the season sparkles. The crowds are smaller, but so are the buses. Riders mingle more and hide less.

The Thursday after Lombardia, the peloton swings southwest into Tuscany's Pisa province for the 197-kilometer Gran Premio Citta di Peccioli-Coppa Sabatini. As the lengthy name suggests, the latest version of the 63-year-old race takes in three circuits up and around Peccioli, a hill town of fewer than 5,000 residents in the heart of Tuscany's racing country. Sienna, home to Strade Bianche's dramatic finish, lies just to the southeast, with Florence to the northwest. Though younger than the races that surround it, this one has been admirably durable, having missed only one start, in 1977.

The change from WorldTour to Italian national classic is palpable. While last year's Lombardia

featured six nationalities in the top 10—and an Irish winner—no non-Italian has finished in the top seven of the Coppa Sabatini for the last two years. That race's mix of winners also speaks to the unpredictable nature of late-season competition, shaped by summer's illnesses and injuries, fueled by the desire to either salvage a catastrophic year or ride a hot streak a little bit longer. It's a rare race that sees classics legends like Argentin, Tchmil, Bettini, and Gilbert listed as winners alongside stage-race specialists like Bernard, Chiapucci, Riis, and Ullrich.

Recently, Sabatini has favored youth. Diego Ulissi scored here in 2013, wedged in between victories at Milano-Torino and the Giro dell'Emilia. Enrico Battaglin won as a neo-pro in 2011, and his teammate Sonny Colbrelli claimed last year's title at age 24.

From Peccioli, the Italian peloton travels northeast across the Apennines to Emilia-Romagna for its closing weekend.

The course runs 200 kilometers through and around Bologna, with five rapid-fire trips up the two-kilometer, 10 percent climb to the Madonna di San Luca chapel in the final 40 kilometers. While the climb-heavy finale helped produce Colombian winners in Carlos Betancur and Nairo Quintana in recent years, enduring Italian Davide Rebellin won in 2014.

The serpentine history of Sunday's season finale, the Giro della Romagna, reflects the trials of being at the bitter end of the calendar, where races struggle to attract scarce sponsorship money, waning fan attention, and the big stars that can help deliver both. First held in 1910, the race around Imola and Forlì rolled through 86 editions, with the usual interruptions, until 2011, when it ran short of funding and merged with the similarly strapped Coppa Placci. In 2012, the Romagna name disappeared, while the Coppa Placci merged with the Giro del Veneto. Oscar Gatto won both those editions, which would mark the last editions of both Coppa Placci and Veneto (so far). For 2013 and 2014, the Romagna name returned, combined this time with the Memorial Marco Pantani, a race founded in 2004 to celebrate the life of the climber from nearby Cesenatico. This year, the two races are being held separately, with Pantani's memorial race held on September 19, and Romagna, independent again, closing the Italian season on October 11.

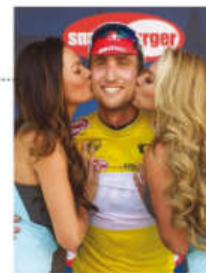
There are races after the October classics in Italy. The faded Chrono des Nations soldiers on the next weekend in France, and the road season now stretches into November to accommodate new races in Asia, Africa, and South America. It is a positive sign for the sport. But as the sun sets in Emilia-Romagna in mid-October, it is only shutting its eyes for an ever-shorter winter hibernation. **V**

Ryan Newill has contributed to *Velo* since 1999. Follow him on Twitter @SC\_Cycling.

# WINNING

## COMEBACK KID

Taylor Phinney surprises everyone by taking stage 1 of the USA Pro Challenge, 14 months after suffering a broken leg



## BMC BLITZ

The American squad took four out of seven stage wins and finished first and second overall, dominating the USA Pro Challenge from start to finish



## WORLDTOUR 2.0

The women's peloton will see longer races, more varied terrain, and better coverage in 2016 with the introduction of the 30-race-day women's WorldTour

## BACK TO BASICS

The doping positive for Giampaolo Caruso, found after a re-analysis of a sample taken in 2012 using new scientific methods, opens the door for massive back-testing



## SAND IN THE VASELINE

A team time trial course that included a sand-strewn bike path and a wooden bridge? Vuelta organizers went a bit too far in their quest to be different.

## FALLING STARS

Fabian Cancellara's nightmare season continued when he abandoned the Vuelta a España due to illness; Vincenzo Nibali's went from bad to worse after he was expelled for taking a tow from his team car



# LOSING



# Ask a Pro

Deep philosophical advice from  
a roadie sage by Phil Gaimon



## What's the best cycling-related purchase you've ever made?

I've worn eyeglasses since first grade. My eyes get irritated when I wear contacts, so for my first few years as a racer, I had to deal with prescription sunglasses and sorting that out with a team's sunglasses sponsor, which could change from year to year. So during one offseason, I spent \$3,000 on Lasik surgery. As far as investments go, carbon wheels and power meters are great, but they're much better if you can see them. The second-best purchase was custom insoles. I have two pairs that have lasted since 2008. I don't let them out of my laser-enhanced sight, and I think I'll have to retire when they wear out.

## I've been having knee problems, but every bike fitter I see gives me different advice. I thought this was a science. Who's right?

Ah, bike fitters. I've had many bad experiences but also a couple good ones. Your best bet is to start with someone who's had some sort of certification or training and has the equipment to do it right. If there's a Retül fitter in your area, go. They don't mess around. (They also don't sponsor me, so you know I'm not lying.)

### Watch out if:

*They try to sell you something:* Maybe you would be better off with a longer stem, but it's also a conflict of interest if they're profiting from selling it to you.

*They offer weird solutions:* Be wary if they say you need all sorts of wedges or spacers, or one pedal longer than the other. There are people with weird physiologies who need special solutions, but most of the time, I think they're getting fancy to impress you.

*They try to fix what ain't broke:* Have you ever hired a contractor to fix your toilet, and then he takes a look and asks what idiot installed your cabinets? They all do that, and a lot of bike fitters have the same attitude. If you feel good and go fast, but they tell you to change everything, they're probably steering you wrong.

*They always know more than you do:* You should have input in your bike fit. Sure, they're the experts, but you know your body. I've seen fitters who refuse to fit a certain brand of saddle,



for example. You should be working with the fitter, not getting bossed around.

Once you find a fitter you trust, remember that it's a process. If something is wrong, go back and work on it before you try another fitter and start from scratch. Also, laser surgery won't help you here, but see my previous answer about insoles.

## Do racers abstain from sex before an event? I've heard that sex is bad for your blood levels.

Yes. Some of them abstain the sheets and everything.

## Do you litter bottles and wrappers during a race?

I try my best to wait until I'm in the feed zone or near a spectator to toss a bottle, and I usually cram wrappers into a pocket. Sometimes, when a race is on, you have to react and don't have time to stuff your pockets, or you simply drop what you're holding. As much as I'd love to see my director's face if I turned around on the road to retrieve an errant Clif gel, I'll admit that I have littered in my time. But I follow simple advice that Jeremy Powers gave me, and I encourage you to join us: For every one thing you litter, pick up two later. As long as you don't forget, you're litter-negative.

I also encourage clubs and teams to sign up for local Adopt-a-Road programs, as the University of Florida team did when I attended school there. If you bring your whole crew, it's almost fun to pick up trash for a day. It's also a great learning experience, because you see all the liquor bottles in the grass, which gives you a better understanding of just how many folks are driving drunk on your favorite roads. Good to remember on days that you don't feel like wearing a helmet.

So this month, we've solved littering and wearing helmets. Next time, I'll cure cancer.

Phil Gaimon races for Optum-Kelly Benefit Strategies. His website is [philthethrill.net](http://philthethrill.net).



# GET OUT THERE



PHOTO: DEVICH / TEAM: SMARTSTOPPRO CYCLING

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# THE BIG HAUL

Reduce your race-day hassles with these smart gear bags

By Dan Cavallari | Photos by Brad Kaminski

The best gear bags feature multiple compartments so you can separate clean clothes from dirty, vents in those compartments so wet gear can dry out, helmet sleeves with space for even the largest lids, and tough construction that can handle repeated abuse.

Choose your bag based on how much gear you need to tote, how you'll be traveling to and from the race, and what kind of conditions you'll face while you're there. Rain in the forecast? Be sure your bag has a vented space for a soaked kit. Baggage handlers in your future? Look for places to stow shoulder straps and heavy nylon construction for durability. Sometimes a simple backpack will do, and other times you'll need a larger duffel. Luckily, some of these bags happen to be both.



## HINCAPIE PRO DUFFEL \$90 CAPACITY: 64 LITERS

★★★★☆

This relatively inexpensive bag doesn't look like much on the outside, but the massive Hincapie Pro Duffel hides plenty of smart features within. Mesh pockets line the main compartment on two sides, ideal for stowing nutrition and other small items. There's plenty of room for helmets—even a smaller TT helmet—in the external helmet sleeve, and two side compartments provide ample space for muddy shoes or other items you'd like to separate from your clothes. One of those pockets has heavy-duty nylon venting to help keep dirty gear from getting even funkier. A mesh divider in the main compartment is handy, but it droops, limiting its usefulness. It's topped off with a water bottle sleeve and durable 420-denier ballistic nylon construction. The bottom is reinforced with 800-denier nylon as well, so it could probably stand up to some rough luggage handlers.



## INSIDE LINE RACE DAY BAG \$240 CAPACITY: 21 LITERS

★★★★☆

If you're like us, you dread the thought of losing a Garmin, a set of keys, or a beloved multitool. Though Inside Line's Race Day Bag is relatively small at 21 liters, it uses that space wisely, with two large zippered compartments that keep all your essentials in safe places, as well as a laptop sleeve. The top pocket offers easy access to essentials like wallets and keys. As an added bonus, the interior water bottle sleeves keep your bidons away from dirt and grime. Full-length zippers on either side let you spread the bag's body wide open for easy packing. Speaking of wide, this pack is quite broad across the shoulders, resulting in a loose fit—not the best choice for bike commuting. Despite that width, the capacity is somewhat limited. One tester had difficulty fitting a large-size Specialized Venge helmet into the external mesh holder. And once a helmet is in, it becomes difficult to fit water bottles in the exterior side pockets. This is a lightweight, good-looking way to tote the essentials but maybe not the best choice when you're packing a lot of gear.



## TIMBUK2 RACE CYCLING DUFFEL \$149 CAPACITY: 65 LITERS

★★★★☆

There's nothing flashy about this duffel—no gimmicks, no contrast stitching or secret compartments. It's just a well-made black bag designed for easy storage of—and access to—race-day gear. It has the requisite cavernous main compartment, smaller ones on either end for shoes and other bits, a lined sunglass/phone pouch, stowaway straps for turning duffel into backpack, and a water-resistant bottom. Well, there is one gimmick: an on-strap bottle opener. But the Timbuk2 stops there. In fact, the lined pocket is soft sided; it might not scratch your lenses, but it won't keep them from getting crushed. Nor is there a system for strapping your helmet to the outside of the bag. The single zipped mesh pocket in the main compartment is probably enough, but we would prefer more, or at least one with dividers.





**ZIPP TRANSITION 1 GEAR BAG \$165**  
**CAPACITY: 56 LITERS**

While having too many pockets is just as bad as having too few—in either case, you can't find anything—the Transition manages not to overdo things, with five versatile compartments in all. The design is ideal for multisport athletes who need to keep multiple sets of clean and dirty gear separate. As one would expect, there's venting to let wet stuff air out. There's also a hardshell pocket on top to protect sunglasses and other expensive but fragile gear. The front sleeve is big enough for an aero helmet, and the removable dividers both keep things organized and give the bag some structure. Bonus: The bag converts from backpack to duffel with straps that tuck away when not in use. Still, in either configuration, this 4.4-pound bag is not one you want to have to carry for long distances.







# AXEL'S

# ARMY

**Axel Merckx is cultivating some of the most talented young riders in cycling through his Axeon Cycling Team**

BY CALEY FRETZ

It's approaching 85 degrees in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, on the eve of the 2015 USA Pro Challenge, but Axel Merckx has goose bumps. He's getting emotional.

"I'm almost more happy now when they win than when I won," he says, looking at the bumps on his forearms as he settles into an Adirondack chair in the Colorado sun. "I don't now why. It's just the way I am."

"They" are the riders for Axeon Cycling Team, the youth-development program Merckx has been running for seven years. Several of them are walking back and forth behind Merckx, 43, on their way to and from massage sessions and other obligations as they prepare for their biggest race of the year. They're young, all between 18 and 23. Most are American, but this year's squad also includes a Kiwi, a Brit, and a rider from Portugal. They come to work, ride, and grow, to prepare themselves for the big jump to a WorldTour team.

"I wanted to create a team that I wish I was on," Merckx says. "I tried to take all the positive experiences I had on all the different teams that I raced on, remove the pressure, and keep the attitude, the personality, the spirit of it. It's been an amazing journey so far. I feel really lucky. I've encountered some great riders and some great athletes. This is the good I want to do for cycling. It's what I want to give back."

Since retiring in 2007, Merckx—a former Belgian national champ, Olympic bronze medalist, son of Eddy—has embarked on a surprising second life as a gifted developer of young cycling talent. Axeon (pronounced the same as "action") is the latest iteration of an under-23 cycling project that has become perhaps the best launching pad for aspiring pros in North America. A third of the 54 riders who have passed through the team's ranks since its inception have moved onto the WorldTour, including Taylor Phinney (BMC); Ian Boswell (Sky); Alex Dowsett (Movistar); Jasper Stuyven and Jesse Sergent (Trek Factory Racing); Carter Jones and Lawson Craddock (Giant-Alpecin); and Joe Dombrowski, Ben King, Nate Brown, and Ruben Zepuntke (Garmin-Cannondale).

In many ways—and especially in the more emotional, goose-bump-inducing ones that have to do with using the crucible of sport to turn





boys into men—Merckx is possibly the closest thing American cycling has to a Mike Kryzewski, the longtime basketball coach of the Duke Blue Devils. With a budget that wouldn't cover Team Sky's bus-cleaning bills, Merckx recruits, mentors, and develops young riders who, by design, will age out of his program within four years. In the best case, he loses them with their glory years still to come. Worst case, they've spent four years chasing a dream and now have to figure out a post-cycling life. In either case, Merckx can only hope his lessons have stuck.

"To me, the success of this team is not the results, or the number of riders we move up," Merckx says. "It's that all the riders who have been in this program, wherever they are, as soon as we're at the same race they come to see us. They stop by, give us hugs; they come and say, 'We miss you guys. We had a great time with you. It was awesome.'"

"That's the success of the program—that they all come back."

**FOR COLLEGE-AGE RIDERS** hoping to make a go of it in the pro ranks, there are only a few options. USA Cycling runs its own development program, which identifies junior and U23 riders and provides European acclimation for those looking to turn pro. But the national squad doesn't race a full calendar, so riders are best off picking a development-oriented trade team as well.

"To me, the success of this team is not the results, or the number of riders we move up. It's that all the riders who have been in this program, wherever they are, as soon as we're at the same race they come to see us."

— AXEL MERCKX

There are other excellent development programs in North America, teams such as California Giant Berry Farms-Specialized (which will fold into Axeon in 2016) and Hincapie Racing, which take riders up to the age of 25. There are plenty in Europe, too, like French-based VC La Pomme, which has turned out top riders (Dan Martin, Alex Howes, Fumi Beppu, Maxime Bouet) for decades.

A growing collegiate racing scene is an option as well, but juggling racing with classwork takes particular dedication. Ted King (Cannondale-Garmin) graduated from Middlebury College before turning to a pro career, and Coryn Rivera (UnitedHealthcare) continues to win at the highest levels of women's cycling despite a course load at Marion University. But for most, school and a top-tier professional lifestyle don't mix well. Nonetheless, Merckx says he never dissuades a rider from trying to balance both.

"I know as much as anybody that after cycling you still have a long life," he says. "Some guys have gone to school and made it. But this team, it's kind of like going to university. That's the idea of it. You come out ready for one job."

#### ALL IN THE FAMILY

Former members of Axel's teams (from left) Gavin Mannion, Joe Dombrowski, Taylor Phinney, Tim Roe, Tanner Putt, Julian Kyer, Ruben Zepuntke, and Ben King stand with some of this year's squad.

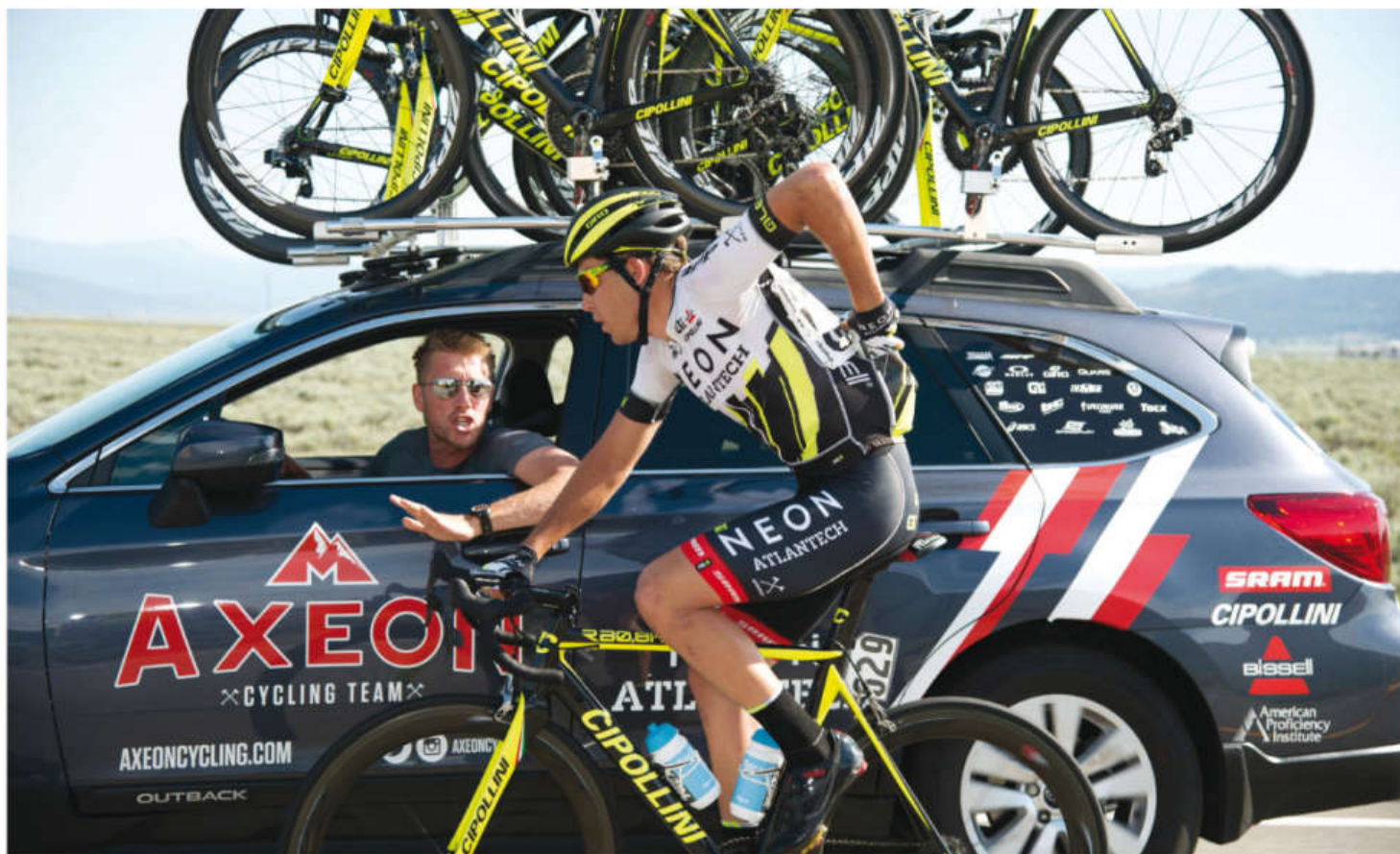
Among the options a young rider has, Axeon is unique in the U.S. both for sticking so strictly to the U23 ranks and for the success of its riders.

That was perhaps never on better display than at this year's U23 national championships. The team completely dominated proceedings as the 167km course rolled through the foothills west of Lake Tahoe, California, and then shed all but a handful of riders on the long climb up to the Northstar ski resort. Axeon took first and second, with Keegan Swirbul, 19, and Gregory Daniel, 20, respectively, and placed five riders in the top 25 overall.

Swirbul's win marked the 20th national championship earned under Merckx since 2009.

**AXEON BEGAN LIFE IN 2009** as Trek-Livestrong. The team, a project between Lance Armstrong and his long-time sponsor Trek, was built primarily as a development vehicle for Taylor Phinney, the then-19-year-old American phenom whom Trek hoped to tie to its brand the way Armstrong had been. Armstrong brought in the newly retired Merckx—his former teammate on





Motorola—to run things.

Those first years remain some of Merckx's finest. Phinney proved worthy, taking the team's first major victory at U23 Paris-Roubaix in 2009. "That was really our first big win, that was very big. That was something special," Merckx says. The young American would repeat at Roubaix in 2010.

Spun throughout Phinney's success in 2009 and 2010 was something less expected. The cast of young riders brought in to support Phinney turned out to be stars in their own right. Along with Phinney, Ben King, Alex Dowsett, Jesse Sergent, and Tim Roe all jumped up to the WorldTour in 2010. Their success convinced Merckx that he could turn what was supposed to be a short-lived project into something both lasting and more effective.

As he set out to rebuild his roster for the following season, Merckx abandoned the single-star model and started thinking about ways to replicate the surprise success of his first group of riders. "I wanted to bring in the best talents we could and make a team out of it," he says, "and turn them into the best pros they could be."

The team dropped Livestrong from its jerseys in 2013, in the wake of the USADA case against Lance Armstrong. But Trek stayed on as a sponsor, either directly or through its Bontrager subsidiary, until 2014, when it pulled out to concentrate on the Trek Factory Racing WorldTour team. Merckx brought in Bissell,

which had been sponsoring a Continental squad, to fill the gap, and the team raced as Bissell Development Team for the 2014 season. For 2015, Merckx brought on an assortment of sponsors. None are title sponsors, however, so the team rebranded as Axeon—a portmanteau of Merckx's first name and Neon Adventures, an investment group that has provided the lion's share of the funding.

With an annual budget of roughly \$1 million—more or less, depending on the year—Axeon is very much a minor-league operation. Peter Sagan alone makes \$4 million per year. Even the poorest of WorldTour teams have budgets over \$10 million. Team Sky has a reported \$40 million to play with annually.

Of course, Axeon is a much smaller operation. There are currently just 12 riders on the team, each earning enough to cover expenses (Merckx declined to provide an exact figure). There is no official base for the team. Merckx works out of his home in Kelowna, British Columbia, and is one of only three full-time staffers. The others are head mechanic Eric Fostvedt, who has been with the team since 2009, and head soigneur Reed McCalvin, who spent the 2014 season working for Phinney in Europe but has otherwise also been around since the beginning.

Merckx checks in with his riders often, and a few have coalesced around training bases in Colorado and California. But it's the team's training camps, both in the early season and in

#### CAPTAIN'S ORDERS

Merckx converses with Daniel Eaton during the under-23 national road race championship in Lake Tahoe, California, a race dominated by the Axeon team.

between races like the Tour of Utah and the Pro Challenge, that make the disparate squad into a single unit. "Camp is crucial," Merckx says. "We set the mold, set the cement, and then hope it comes together nicely."

"We cook a lot together, hang out and play pool, sit in a hot tub, have a lot of fun," says Tao Geoghegan Hart, a product of British Cycling now in his second year racing for Axeon.

**IN ANY PROFESSIONAL TEAM SPORT,** recruiting is tricky. But the constant churn that comes with Axeon's U23 model makes things especially complicated. Recruitment is even more difficult within Axeon's age bracket, as the physical development of riders often occurs in stops and starts through their junior years, making it challenging to tell which are truly talented and which simply developed a year or two earlier than the rest. Gauging personality at this age is difficult, too. A four-year stint for these riders amounts to nearly 20 percent of the time they've been alive. Who they are when Merckx signs them is not necessarily who they will be in





#### CHIEF SPIRIT OFFICER

As head soigneur and one of only three staff, McCalvin serves as mentor, teacher, counselor, advocate, and agent.

“Reed and Axel pride themselves a little bit on looking at people for more than just results. It’s a bit of a cliché. A lot of teams will tell you that, but they actually do it.”

— TAO GEOGHEGAN HART

two or three years.

“My best allies are my riders,” Merckx says. “The ones on the team now or who were on the team before are the ones that can say, ‘That guy would fit the team. He’d fit the mold.’ I get riders offered to me, really talented riders, but I don’t pursue all of them. First of all, I can’t, but also because I want to keep the right spirit.”

“We have 12 guys and 12 different personality types,” Merckx says. “There are guys I have to slow down, because they want it so bad that they will do harm. And then some guys, yeah, you gotta kick their asses. If they don’t want it, that’s fine. There are many kids that want it. There are a lot of kids who want to do this, so don’t waste somebody else’s chance by not doing the work.”

One key to the team’s success is what McCalvin calls the “no-asshole policy.”

“Reed and Axel pride themselves a little bit on looking at people for more than just results,” says Geoghegan Hart. “It’s a bit of a cliché. A lot of teams will tell you that, but they actually do it. Reed’s all about that. At the end of the day, he has to work with the bike riders all year, and if someone is a pain in his ass, he has to deal with it all year.”

Though Merckx ultimately calls the shots, McCalvin, 39, a fast-talking ex-Army paratrooper and sniper with a degree in business from Duke, is the day-to-day guy. “If Axel is the handsome politician, I’m the guy behind the scenes, doing lots of the heavy lifting,” he says. That means he’s the one helping riders who may have never lived

away from their parents before—or who may still live with their parents—deal with the sudden pressures of professional sports. He has to be a recruiter and manager but also a friend and surrogate father who can help his charges make sense of the new world they’re entering.

“The number one thing [Reed] taught me was to have fun,” says Nate Brown, Cannondale-Garmin’s leader at the USA Pro Challenge and a 2013 graduate of the team. “Still do your job, but have fun doing it. The moment you purely focus, you lose who you are. I took that to heart. The further you get into the sport, you have to focus more and watch what you do, but as a U23 that was the best advice.”

One of the benefits of Axeon for aspiring pros is that, unlike riders on feeder squads associated with pro teams, Merckx’s riders can enter the pro ranks unencumbered by sponsorship or team obligations. They’re free to go where their talent and opportunities take them.

“They’re not linked to a brand,” Merckx says. “They’re free agents. They go wherever they want. And then those big teams, if they really want them, they have to persuade the rider that they’re the right choice. It’s supply and demand.”

**SITTING OUT IN THE COLORADO SUN,** Merckx doesn’t know that his 20-year-old GC phenom Geoghegan Hart will finish the USA Pro Challenge in seventh place overall and

win the best young rider competition, or that Daniel Eaton will place fourth in the Breckenridge time trial, or that Logan Owen will come away with three top-10s in the sprints. Another set of Axeon pups likely headed for bigger things.

Merckx will soon have more roster holes to fill, if not this year then the next. But the never-ending, Sisyphean cycle just seems to motivate him. In fact, he says he has turned down offers from WorldTour teams for the chance to keep working with the kids. And he’s doubling down for 2016. Axeon is set for a dramatic makeover next season. It will be bigger, broader, and quite a bit richer. During the Pro Challenge, Merckx announced the addition of California Giant Berry Farms, Specialized, and Hagens Berman as sponsors. SRAM returns, as it has every year since the team’s inception. Merckx will have a bigger budget, “not to pay the guys more but to give them more tools, more information, more opportunities to race not only here but in Europe,” he says.

Across seven years, four major sponsors, and the tumult of the Armstrong affair, one out of every three Axeon riders has stepped into a top professional team. While you’re pondering that, consider the possibilities that lie ahead. With the expansion of his squad on the horizon, Merckx will take even more chances; he’ll sign more riders that are still unproven. Perhaps that rate of success will be sustainable with a bigger program, perhaps it won’t be. Regardless, there is no denying the ability of this team to shape the future of American racing.

“Here, we do everything we can to push them forward, to make them ready,” Merckx says, opening his hands wide as if he’s offering something. “When they are ready, whoever wants them can grab them.”



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2015  
CYCLOCROSS  
PREVIEW

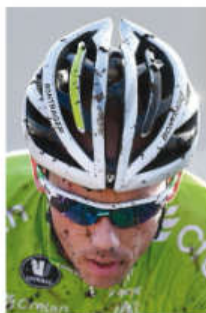
# CYCLOCROSS'S CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The European season will  
showcase very young  
and very talented stars

BY DAN SEATON







NYS



VAN DER HAAR



VANTHORENHOUT



VAN AERT

EUROPEAN CYCLOCROSS HEADED INTO the 2014-'15 season in flux, with many of the sport's long-established protagonists either absent or vulnerable. And while its young rising stars showed promise, none had yet been seriously vetted among the elite ranks.

Two-time world champion Niels Albert had just retired due to a life-threatening heart condition diagnosed that spring. Reigning men's world champion Zdenek Stybar, barely back from an ugly crash at the Eneco Tour a month earlier, remained focused on his burgeoning road career and planned to race only a handful of cyclocross races. Sven Nys, by far the most popular and successful cyclocrosser of the modern era—and one of the oldest too—faced a challenge from two undeniably gifted but unproven young riders: Wout Van Aert, reigning under-23 world champion, and Mathieu van der Poel, the 2013 junior world champion in both cyclocross and road. Could these two young riders match a legend and fill the void left by Albert and Stybar?

Meanwhile, perennial women's champion Marianne Vos was absent from the sport entirely, opting to race an abbreviated late-season schedule after a poor showing at the road world championships in Ponferrada, Spain. American Katie Compton, Vos' longtime rival, had battled allergies and asthma for much of the 2013-14 season and was hoping for a return to both form and health.

Another question: Would Vos' absence and Compton's struggles open the door for young women, just as Stybar and Albert's departures might for the men? Belgian Sanne Cant and Dutchwoman Sophie De Boer, both 24 at the time, figured to be the prime candidates.

It was not long before the young guard delivered answers. De Boer took major wins at Ronse and Koppenbergcross and briefly held the World Cup lead. Cant had a breakout season that included 26 wins and her first World Cup title; she was runner-up at the world championships, second to another young rider, 2014 road world champion Pauline Ferrand-Prévot.

For the men, too, the season belonged to the young riders. Van der Poel and Van Aert, who would go one-two at worlds after opting to forego their under-23 eligibility and race among the elites, dominated the racing and the conversation, especially after Nys' season collapsed. Thanks to that young duo, the average age of the men on the elite podium at worlds in 2015 was 21 years, 120 days, nearly 50 days younger than the average age of the under-23 podium.

Can there be any doubt that a youth movement is in full flower in international cyclocross?

## IN BLOOM

The 2015-16 season promises an even more youthful look. Two more Belgian retirements—two-time world champion Bart Wellens and former junior world champion Bart Aernouts—should open up more opportunities for new

elite riders like 2015 under-23 world champion Michael Vanthourenhout (Sunweb-Napoleon Games) and U23 Belgian champ Laurens Sweeck (Corendon-Kwardo), just cleared to race after a long, contested doping investigation. Both men already rank in the top 10 in the world.

Van Aert (VastgoedService-Golden Palace) and van der Poel (BKCP-Corendon) look poised to continue the rivalry that began last year. The former is mentored by Niels Albert, now a sport director for his squad, and has flourished under his tutelage. But Van Aert's style is less like that of the impetuous Albert, who won races with speed and power, and more like Nys, who dominates with a combination of finesse, constancy, and racing savvy. His Dutch rival, van der Poel, is fast off the line and very clever, a tough combination to beat on a fast, technical track.

Neither raced a full schedule among the elites last season, and how well each adapts to a heavier load this season remains to be seen. Assuming the two successfully navigate the transition to full-time elite professional, they'll continue to own the headlines and podiums in 2015-'16.

They will meet resistance from established racers, none of whom will be pleased to cede hard-earned ground to the young upstarts. Belgian Kevin Pauwels (Sunweb-Napoleon Games), who won his second World Cup title last season, and Dutchman Lars van der Haar (Giant-Alpecin), who finished third behind the pair at the 2015 world championship, will likely lead the resistance. But Belgians Tom Meeusen (Telenet-Fidea) and Klaas Vantornout (Sunweb-Napoleon Games), German Philipp Walsleben (BKCP-Corendon), and Dutch rider Corné Van Kessel (Telenet-Fidea) will be chasing opportunities for wins.

And of course there is Nys (Crelan-AA Drink), entering his final season as a professional. Will he return to the legendary form that has earned him more than 300 career victories? "I definitely want something more," Nys says. "For me it's important I can race every race [in the] top five. I know that I can't win every race anymore. I'm 39 years of age and there are a few guys who are 20, 21, really talented, explosive, and riding really well for the moment. So we'll see. But my level is strong enough to stand a lot of times on the podium and [get] results in the top five."

Nys may claim to be satisfied with top-five finishes, but it's hard to imagine he won't want to leave his legions of Belgian fans with a more definitive final statement.

Meanwhile, American fans will see a changing landscape. Jonathan Page (Page-Fuji) sold his home in Belgium and moved to Utah. He will now focus on the domestic circuit. Simultaneously, Jeremy Powers (Aspire Racing), whose commitment to the World Cup series last season earned him a top-10 overall finish, will look to make progressive strides abroad (see page 40).

The arc of the season itself is also likely to be seriously altered by the addition of the first World Cup stop outside Europe, with CrossVegas

**BOY KING**  
Mathieu van der Poel surged onto the elite cyclocross scene last year, ultimately taking the world title in Tabor, Czech Republic.





2015  
CROSS  
PREVIEW

## OUTDUELED

Katie Compton (left) was beaten at the line by a tenacious Sanne Cant at the Milton Keynes World Cup last year. Likewise, Cant was outgunned by Pauline Ferrand-Prévot (far right) at the world championships.



coming in mid-September.

"Certainly the first World Cup kicking off a full month earlier than traditionally changes the picture," says Brook Watts, CrossVegas race director. "I'm hearing of some riders who are putting in some of their hardest, most dedicated training in years, recognizing that the level of fitness needs to be higher from the outset. Now, whether we see some riders getting flat after a couple of months of racing is the key question."

Nys, for example, attributed his implosion in 2014 to early-season training overload. Nys started his campaign on fire with a win at CrossVegas, but could not sustain his form through the season, despite taking time off to rest in early December. What strategy will a rider chasing the World Cup overall have to use to sustain good form from early September to late January? The rider who solves the puzzle of the extended season could reap major rewards later on.

## WOMEN TO THE FORE

Among the women, American Katie Compton (Trek Factory Racing) may be on track to do just that. Dogged by allergies, Compton has failed to deliver on the promise of her early season form for two years in a row. To deal with this and other health issues, she has adapted her program. She took time off during the summer and will spend less time in Europe and more at home in the clear, dry air of the Rocky Mountains this year.

"I have energy again," she says. "I can breathe and my allergies are much better so that's a huge positive. On the downside, I'm coming into the season with the least amount of riding I've ever had, so I plan on building for January and hope to have my best races later in the season."

As Compton chases a world championship that

has eluded her for the better part of a decade, she and her fellow women competitors should benefit from an increasingly positive climate for women's racing in Europe. In 2014, Belgium's Koppenbergcross became the first race to offer equal prize money to men and women, thanks to the leadership of British champion Helen Wyman (Kona), who lives nearby, and financial support from Baltimore-based Twenty20 Cycling.

Meanwhile, UCI's Rule 5.1.048, which prohibits its race promoters from running women's races in unfavorable, morning time slots, should take full force this year. (Superprestige races received a waiver last season due to a conflict with their pre-existing TV rights licensing.) It will move women's racing further to the fore in Europe, where it is already rapidly growing in popularity.

If regulations and prize money have helped accelerate those gains, the increasing number of authentic women's stars have been the foundation. Belgians Sanne Cant (Enertherm-BKCP) and Ellen Van Loy (Telenet-Fidea) both enjoyed breakout 2014-15 seasons. Vos and Ferrand-Prévot (both Rabo-Liv), Compton, Wyman, and Czech champion Katerina Nash (Luna) are also among the women with dedicated and growing fanbases. All are likely to be protagonists this season.

Among them, Cant has taken the biggest step forward and will likely be an early favorite, assuming she is fully recovered from a collision with a tractor during training earlier this year. Cant had sharp words for the women she called "part-timers" in the press conference after worlds, where she was outdueled by Ferrand-Prévot. Though Cant later walked back from those comments, it's true that the influx of fresh racers late in the season compounds the difficulties for women chasing the world title.

Still, Cant was one of a number of beneficia-

ries from their absences early on. The women's field will likely enjoy such a benefit again. Vos has been hampered by injury since early in the year. This summer she finally elected to abandon her racing efforts indefinitely and as of late August had yet to set a target date for her return. Ferrand-Prévot, meanwhile, will likely skip the early season again as she recovers from a busy summer of racing both on and off road.

In their absence, the biggest challenges may come from compatriots Van Loy and Jolien Verschueren (Telenet-Fidea), both of whom are coming off career-best seasons. Meanwhile, Wyman and countrywoman Nikki Harris (Telenet-Fidea) lead a strong and growing British contingent that could benefit from a power vacuum at the top of the sport.

And the youngest women, who have previously had no choice but to race alongside more seasoned veterans at the world championships, will benefit from the addition of a combined category for juniors and under-23 women at worlds.

Those championships, to be held on the final weekend in January, on the former Formula 1 track in Heusden-Zolder, Belgium, promise to be like nothing we have ever seen before. Organizers said they expect as many as 80,000 fans to pack the venue. If so, attendance would dwarf the record-setting crowd of more than 60,000 who turned out the last time worlds visited Belgium, in Koksijde in 2012.

But worlds remains months away. One thing cyclocross has always delivered is unpredictability—this season should be no different. Yet, in a sport brimming with young talent, new opportunities for women, and one of the most challenging race calendars in recent history, the ride, from Vegas to Zolder, September to January, will be predictably thrilling.



Andrew Talansky: U.S. National Time Trial Champ, 2015

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# AMERICAN GLADIATORS

The veterans, fresh faces, and budding rivalries of the domestic cyclocross season

BY CHRIS CASE



FOR SEVERAL YEARS, Jeremy Powers and Katie Compton have been the king and queen of American 'cross, the riders of reference and the de facto favorites at every race they start on American soil. But the depth of talent in domestic cyclocross continues to mature, just as some of the veterans of the sport begin their ride into the autumnal sunset. They're all on a collision course, to be played out on the grassy knolls and muddy slopes of our nation's patchwork quilt of cyclocross stadia.

Compton (Trek Factory Racing) is indisputably the best American cyclocross racer in history, having amassed an incredible 11 straight national titles, more than 20 World Cup wins (including two overall titles), four medals at the world championships (three silver and one bronze), and more than 100 UCI race wins. But she comes into the 2015-'16 season with several question marks.

Last season was a bust, as Compton suffered through allergies and asthma issues that saw her failing to dominate as she once did. And

though she has decided to skip the antibiotics she uses to treat her breathing issues, which sapped her energy, she struggled this offseason with a saddle sore that kept her off the bike for nearly two and a half months.

Though she's still aiming for a high finish in the World Cup overall and strong showings at the national and world championships, she has decided not to spend as much time in Europe this season and will instead fly back and forth as needed for the World Cups.

"I don't know how the early season races are going to play out, but I'm going to race as hard as I can and hope for the best," Compton says. "I'm just happy I'm actually feeling better than I have in years and I'm not so weak and exhausted all the time."

More so than Compton, Powers (Aspire Racing) is making comprehensive changes this season. He's adding high profile sponsors, including BMW, Nuun, and Clif Bar, and he's utilizing a new training regimen. Unlike Compton, he's not making the changes in response to a disappointing season, but rather to better his skillset for the international game. He's reinventing what was already a fine-tuned machine, and it's making him anxious.

"I changed everything, I really did," Powers says. "Probably changed the most I have ever changed. I am nervous about the mileage being missing because I have done so much gym work and so much strength work.

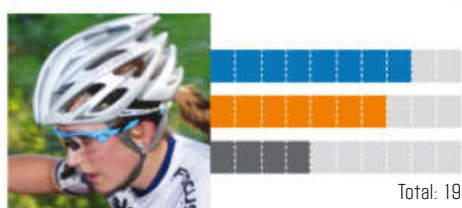
"The things I was lacking were very clear at the end of last year: low-cadence mud riding and running. Now that I have been able to be in the gym,

## THE QUEEN

The dominant woman on the American cyclocross scene, Katie Compton hopes to deliver again on the European stage.



## WOMEN



## EVOLUTION

Jeremy Powers continues to work hard on the skills that will pay dividends in European cyclocross, including running and powering through thick mud.

I have made a very strong change. I am going to ride the season bigger, heavier. I have probably put on three or more pounds of muscle."

On tap is another crack at the full World Cup schedule, with an overriding theme of steady progression. "Take that ninth overall in the World Cup and turn that into maybe fifth overall," he says. "And take my best placing, which was ninth, and hopefully turn that into fifth or better as well. CrossVegas is a good opportunity for me, on a course I have had success on in the past, to maybe do something at that level."

But Powers and Compton won't just be battling their own form. As is the case in Europe, a crop of young American pros is coming up to challenge the veterans' hold on the sport.

Let the battles begin.

## FRESH FACES

Just 20 years old, Ellen Noble (JAM/NCC/Vittoria) is among the youngest of 'cross racers who could step into the spotlight this season. Overall winner of the 2014-15 Verge New England Cyclocross Series, and sixth place at nationals in Austin, Noble plans to expand her schedule to take in most of the UCI C1 designated races around the U.S.

The spirited Maine native says racing in Europe is also guaranteed, but when and for how long is still a work in progress. And she's keeping her aspirations for American races partially under wraps.

"I like to write a list of extremely detailed goals at the beginning of every season, but I like to keep that pretty hush-hush," Noble says. "I am really pleased with how last season went, but I want this season to be even better. I had eight second places last year. I would like to improve on those a bit. I also raced pretty poorly at a lot of the C1 races, and I don't want that to happen again. Of course, the inaugural under-23 worlds are in my sights, and making the team and having a good ride there is a huge focus of mine."

A personal trainer and fitness instructor by day, Courtenay McFadden is another talent

poised to regularly contend for the podium on the national scene. She took her first UCI victory last year by winning the third day of Jingle Cross, breaking Katerina Nash's (Luna) six-race win streak in the process.

She has planned another ambitious program this year, despite running her own team.

"I wasn't able to land a title sponsor though, so I haven't figured out my actual team name," she says. "My goal would be to ultimately expand my program to include another women rider next year—that would make me really happy to have a teammate, and also to give more women the opportunity to race at the top level."

Despite finishing in the top five on 15 occasions last season, McFadden struggled at nationals, again, coming home in 12th. It's a trend she hopes to put an end to at this year's event in Asheville.

"Nationals is like the elusive race for me," she says. "I got the flu two years ago and last year I was suffering from insomnia. Perhaps the third year is the charm!"

Another racer coming off a stellar 2014-15 campaign is Pennsylvania-based Arley Kemmerer (Level Eleven Racing p/b PB2 Peanut Butter). While running her own law practice, she was able to capture 11 top-five finishes across the season, including wins on both days of the Rockland County Supercross. She firmly placed herself on the list of contenders at every race she started, dabbling in European races, including three rounds of the World Cup. The plan is similar this season.

"My goal is to go back to the world championships, so everything I do this season will have an eye towards that," Kemmerer says. "Zolder is my absolute favorite course in Europe, and given that worlds will be held there this year, I'm really gunning to make the team."

Meredith Miller (Noosa Pro Cyclocross) continues to roll on, reinvigorated by her win at CrossVegas last year, ahead of Compton and Nash. At 42, she has a veteran's perspective on this season.

"It's hard to do, but I want to take some pressure off myself this year," she says. "I want to go





to worlds, but I also don't want to get caught in the numbers game. I need to approach the season race by race rather than thinking too far ahead about the what-ifs."

After five years of racing with the elite women, Kaitie Antonneau (Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld.com) has shown flashes of brilliance. The former under-23 national champion is a consistent threat to the podium—she was second to Compton at nationals in Austin—especially when conditions are at their worst. But for all her successes, she has never won a UCI race since joining the Cannondale squad. She hopes to change that this year. And on a team filled with colorful characters like Tim Johnson, Ryan Trebon, and Curtis White, she stays relaxed, and benefits from that atmosphere.

"When you have a team with guys like Tim, Ryan, and Curtis, and [team owner] Stu [Thorne], that kind of takes your mind away from the race and you can relax a little bit," she says. "It's good and helps me race better in the long run."

One rising star who we won't see until later this season is Elle Anderson. The breakthrough rider of the 2013-'14 season—the first American woman to beat Compton on U.S. soil since 2006—Anderson jumped the pond to race a full season in Europe last year. But she struggled mentally and physically due to sickness, injury, and the stresses of being alone in the different cultural environment of Belgium. She's been back in the States since March, resuming full-time work as a technical support manager at Strava and regrouping.

"It's been tough for me ever since hitting U.S. soil after Belgium," Anderson says. "It was a miracle I survived in Europe until February. This summer, I finally stopped forcing myself to ride and train, which means I'll take extra time completely off the bike until I can return to riding in a happier and healthier mindset. I'm holding on to the hope that I'll be ready to do some racing in November in the U.S. and some European racing in December with USA Cycling."

## RACING WITH THE KING

When Powers competes on American soil there will be no shortage of compatriots looking to knock him off his throne. While he always has his eye on veterans like Ryan Trebon (Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld.com) and Jonathan Page (Page-Fuji), the New Englander sees a number of younger talents as rising threats.

"I think Stephen Hyde (Cannondale-Cyclocrossworld.com) will be good this year because he's got a lot of support and expectation," Powers says. "Coming from JAM Fund, but going to Cannondale this year, I think we are going to see him on the podium. If Logan Owen (California Giant-Specialized) is able to focus on 'cross

more, then I think he will be coming of age, if you will. Ryan [Trebon], of course, is capable, whether or not it comes in September or December, for sure I will stand on the podium and he will be a force to be reckoned with. Because I have seen the amount of time Jeremy Durrin's been putting in, Durrin (Neon Velo) is someone I would expect to be coming in strong. Allen Krughoff (Noosa Pro Cyclocross) had a great beginning to last season.

"And Danny Summerhill (Maxxis-Shimano) obviously beat me last year. I know he has the depth, but it is another thing if you are coming off the road."

As far as the veterans are concerned, we'll see much more of Page, a New Hampshire native who has rarely raced in the U.S. in the past decade. The four-time national champ and silver medalist at the 2007 worlds moved from Belgium to Ogden, Utah, this year. Apart from the world championships and possibly the World Cup before it, he plans to race exclusively in the U.S. for his final complete season.

"I'm excited," Page says. "The biggest difference is that most of the races are going to be new for me. I'm also happy because it feels like people really want me at the races. They are excited I am going to be here."

On the other hand, we'll see much less of a man who has defined domestic cyclocross for more than a decade, as Tim Johnson continues to suffer from a herniated disc in his back. He has not retired, but he won't be racing this season, and his return is anything but guaranteed.

In the meantime, he has taken on the role of mentor and coach to the expanding Cannondale team. "Being able to work with the guys and girls is really the best thing I could do," Johnson says. "I'm not going to turn my back on racing and just walk away. I've been able to be a part of a community that's given me a lot, and it's made me feel pretty special. I feel like there's a lot of great stuff we can continue to do even if I'm not racing day in and day out."

Similarly, his teammate Trebon struggled last year with injury and disappointment. He is now rehabilitated and hopes to return to the podium in due time.

"I would actually just like to get back to racing," he says. "I did a handful of races [last year], but I never really raced—I was more just kind of out there. I want my back to feel better. I want to feel good and powerful and be able to be active in the races versus just being a passenger at the back of the bus, which sucks."

He anticipates starting the season slightly off the pace, but by the time October rolls around, look for the old Trebon. He's certain the back won't be a problem this season.

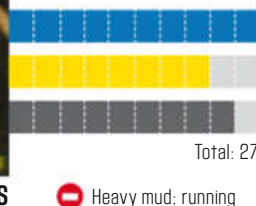
"Every race you start you want to win, but if I feel a certain way on the bike I know I am going to win," he says. "That's what I desire and try to strive for now. I just want to feel like myself on the bike and I haven't had that feeling in so long." ✓

SKILL POWER EXPERIENCE ACHILLES' HEEL

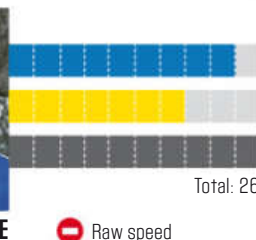
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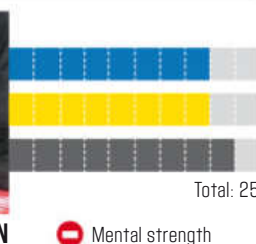
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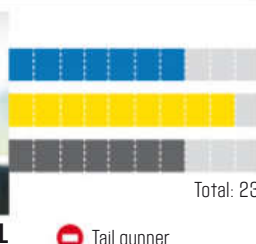
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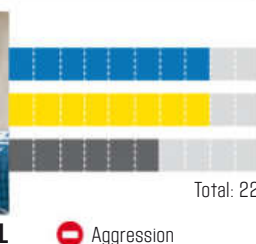
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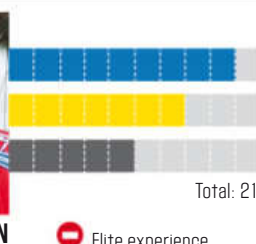
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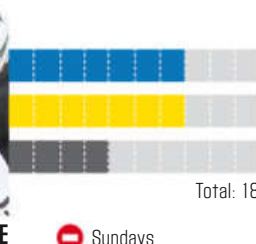
DANNY SUMMERHILL



LOGAN OWEN



STEPHEN HYDE



DEJAN SMAG (6); DAVE MCELWANE



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# COURSES FOR 'CROSSERS

The most iconic and dynamic venues in Europe

BY DAN SEATON

European cyclocross races are consistently inconsistent. The fan favorite Roubaix velodrome course resurfaces only every few years, while other races trade calendar slots, series affiliations, and even venues in the hunt for fans, riders, and the lucrative TV contracts that come with the big series. But while the dates and series may change, the classic venues—the most spectacular, the most difficult, the best loved—always pop up somewhere along the way. Here are five of the greatest Belgian cyclocross courses and the things that make them special.

1

## GP ZONHOVEN, ZONHOVEN, BELGIUM

*The first weekend of November in recent years*

Zonhoven, set on a wide-open sandy heath, is a 10-year-old revival of a race first run in the 1950s. Still, with its two daredevil plunges into a steep-walled, arena-like sand pit, the race has become an instant classic. “It’s like you are racing in a football stadium,” says Sven Nys, the record holder with five wins. “That race is a modern cyclocross like every cyclocross rider dreams of.”

**THE SAND ARENA** Few races boast a feature as spectacular as the precipitous plunges that throw riders into Zonhoven’s vast sand pit. Crowded with fans, it becomes cyclocross’ gladiatorial arena. Crashes here are often spectacular, though, thanks to the soft sand, rarely catastrophic.

**THE CLIMB** Though a mishap on one of the sandy descents can end hopes for a win, Zonhoven is usually won on the steep, sandy climbs near the end of each lap. A big effort here late in the race can easily put victory in reach.

**THE SAND BOX**  
The natural amphitheater of sand in Zonhoven is used to create one of the most exciting courses in all of cyclocross.



# BELGIUM



2

## DUINENCROSS, KOKSIJDE, BELGIUM

*Late November*

If there is an all-time attendance record for cyclocross, it almost certainly belongs to Koksijde, which hosted more than 60,000 fans for the 2012 world championships. Laid out on the flat grounds of a Belgian air base, it would be unspectacular if not for the massive dunes that make this among the most difficult races on the calendar.

**THE DUNES** Named for the two men's world champions crowned in Koksijde—Paul Herygers in 1994 and Niels Albert in 2012—Koksijde's dunes are by far its most important feature. If conditions are dry and loose, only a handful of riders in the world are skilled and powerful enough for a shot at victory.

**SPEED** Take away the sand and Koksijde is a dead flat, grassy drag race. In an evenly matched contest, it is often the high tempo grassy sections where the race is won. Additionally, ahead of the 2012 world championships, organizers added a short final straightaway off of a sharp right-hander. Good position entering the turn now often decides the outcome.

3

## DRUIVENCROSS, OVERIJSE, BELGIUM

*Early December*

With a history that dates to 1960, Overijse may be the longest continuously running cyclocross race in Europe. Victory on this course—folded tightly onto a steep, wooded hillside in the southern suburbs of Brussels—requires a combination of power and finesse. Belgian legend Roland Liboton has 16 wins here. Sven Nys has six, and Katie Compton and Daphny van den Brand have earned three victories each in the women's edition, which dates to 2010.

**UP AND DOWN** The course climbs to the hilltop pit area multiple times in different ways—through the woods, on cobbles, and on grass. Riders must be able to go right to their limit and recover quickly.

**THE WOODS** No single section of the Overijse course is as consistently decisive as the woods, full of slick loamy soil, off-camber descents, and whiplash corners that leave little margin for error.

DIEGEM, BELGIUM



4

## KOPPENBERGCROSS, OUDENAARDE, BELGIUM

*Annually on November 1*

Few hillsides resonate with as much significance as the cobbled Koppenberg. Swathed in grassy pastureland, it rises to a mere 250 feet, but that's enough to wreak havoc on the legs that have to climb it. Nys has won nine of the last 13 editions. Among the women, local favorite Helen Wyman leads with three victories.

**THE COBBLES** There is no denying the mystique of the Tour of Flanders' famed cobbled climb. The 'cross race uses about half of that ascent before cutting to the right and finishing the climb on grass.

**THE DESCENT** Though the race is often won on the climb, it is just as often lost on the tricky descent toward the finish. The course rips through six harrowing, high-speed switchbacks, each packed deep with fans.

5

## SUPERPRESTIGE CYCLOCROSS DIEGEM, DIEGEM, BELGIUM

*Kerstperiode, late December*

The distinctly urban Diegem Superprestige stop stands out from the pastoral settings of most Belgian races. That this event has been run at night under artificial lighting since 2007 only adds to the mystique—and the party-like atmosphere. The race has been part of the Superprestige since the series' inception in 1982 and figures prominently in the busy Kerstperiode (Christmastime) schedule.

**THE TARMAC** Few cyclocross races feature as much asphalt as Diegem. The race starts just outside the town center and winds through several parks connected by long stretches on the road.

**THE WELL-ROUNDED RACER** The course brings together a wide variety of terrain: asphalt, forest, grass, hard-packed dirt paths, and several fly-overs and staircases. Without a single highly selective feature, it favors a well-rounded racer and often is won by clever tactics in the final lap. ✓



# Arabian days

Cycling in the Middle East keeps pumping,  
with the Tour of Abu Dhabi the next big stop

BY ANDREW HOOD

THE PELOTON IS ON THE RIVET, driving full bore into a howling crosswind. On one side are Tom Boonen's henchmen at Etixx-Quick-Step, and on the other, Tinkoff-Saxo, drilling it for Peter Sagan. The elastic snaps. The peloton crumbles into echelons, and there's no hope for anyone chasing back to the meaty part of the pack. A scene from the Tour of Flanders? A Tour de France stage across wind-strewn Brittany? No, it's just another day at the Tour of Qatar.

The global reach of cycling has taken grip in some unusual toeholds. Three decades ago, it would have been hard to imagine major races in Malaysia, Australia, or Argentina, but today, the

sport is truly global. And the most unlikely of new hotbeds? The Middle East.

What started with the Tour of Qatar in 2002 has steadily grown into an Arab cycling boom. As the sport struggles in its traditional centers of Spain and Italy, it's thriving in the Middle East. Qatar was first to host a race, adding a women's race in 2009. The Tour of Oman joined in 2010, and in 2014 the Tour of Dubai was founded. In October, the Tour of Abu Dhabi makes its debut.

Why the surge in popularity? Money—the region is overflowing with it. But do these races constitute real racing, or are they just a chance for the emirs and sheiks to show off their glistening



**SAND STORM**  
Stage 2 of the 2015 Tour of Qatar included high winds and sand-blasted echelons.



*"I'm always very happy to come back to Qatar. You don't find these windy days anywhere else in the world. It's a hardman's race."*

—Tom Boonen



TOUR OF QATAR, 2011

modern oases in the desert? There is certainly a sense of flaunting, especially in over-the-top Dubai, where Bugattis and Ferraris are part of the race caravan. But anytime you have riders like Boonen toeing the line, it's the real deal.

"Qatar is one of the hardest races of the year," says Movistar's Rory Sutherland, who has raced at Qatar and Dubai. "For the classics guys, this is their last race before heading to Belgium. Every one is full-gas."

## Desert winds

There may be more camels than fans on the roadside, but when the flag drops in the Middle East, the race is on, and with an Arabian flare. The VIP village consists of a few tents propped in the middle of a sea of sand dunes, where hot tea and couscous are served. Where else can you get a race telay due to a dust storm?

There is no l'Alpe d'Huez and no pavé. The most striking features of racing in the Middle East have nothing to do with topography, but what sits above and below it. Underground, of course, is the source of the region's fabulous wealth—the world's largest deposits of natural gas and crude oil. From that wealth has sprung some of the world's most fabulous structures, including the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest freestanding structure at 2,722 feet, which towers over half a mile above the otherwise featureless landscape in Dubai.

The heat is unrelenting, with temperatures soaring above 120° Fahrenheit from May to September. The region is entirely barren, desert, and Muslim. Parched journalists pay \$18 for a pint of beer in bars that cater only to western expatriates.

And fans? Hardly any. A smattering of curious expats and locals will turn out when the races start in major cities, but once the racing begins, there is almost no one watching, especially as the peloton spins into the desolation of the desert.

"It is a little bit eerie and weird to be racing on roads with no one watching us," says BMC's Brent Bookwalter, who was second overall in the 2013 Tour of Qatar. "I will have these moments of

reflection during the race, and wonder what we're doing out here. It doesn't affect the racing, but sometimes it does seem a little bit odd."

What the Middle East has in surplus, at least in terms of cycling riches, is wind. On the flats surrounding Doha and Dubai, there's nothing to stop it as it roars across the Persian Gulf.

Sometimes the wind can literally grind things to a halt. The shamal is a northwesterly wind, one that struck the 2015 Tour of Oman, kicking up a sandstorm so intense riders stopped during stage 5 and huddled for protection under a highway underpass. The stage was eventually cancelled.

But the wind is why riders such as Boonen, Fabian Cancellara (Trek Factory Racing), and other stars of the often-windy northern classics love racing in Qatar. Boonen has won the overall title four times and taken a record 22 stages in Qatar.

"I'm always very happy to come back to Qatar," Boonen says. "You don't find these windy days anywhere else in the world. It's a hardman's race. It's 60kph [average speed] in the first hour of the race sometimes. So it's logical, when you're good here, you will be at the front and fighting for victory at the classics."

The results speak for themselves. Every year that Boonen won the overall title at Qatar, he won either Flanders or Paris-Roubaix.

## Breaking new ground

What would you do if you were a ruler of a country, and you fancied a bike race in your kingdom? You'd call Eddy Merckx, of course.

That is how the Tour of Qatar started in the early 2000s. Qatar's then-ruling emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in addition to being the absolute leader, is one of the richest men in the world. He is no stranger to Paris, and as an avid sportsman, he has seen the finale of the Tour de France on the Champs-Élysées during his frequent visits.

So what did he do when he wanted a race of his own? He called Merckx, naturally.

John Lelangue, a former sport director at Phonak and BMC, has had a front-row seat to the

evolution of Arab cycling. In 2001, he worked as a top official at Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO), owners of the Tour de France, under then-director Jean-Marie Leblanc.

"The emir called Eddy, and said they wanted to start a bike race in Qatar," Lelangue recounts. "He called ASO, and we signed on to help run the race. It all went through Eddy."

Lelangue's father was a sport director for Merckx late in the legend's career, and today he works for the Qatari cycling federation as its point man for the 2016 world road cycling championships. In Qatar, everything gravitates back to the emir.

"Qatar is truly committed to cycling, and they have the resources to invest in the sport," Lelangue says. "I remember at BMC, we always brought a top squad to the race, because everything was first-class. These are important races for the teams."

ASO doesn't own the races in Qatar or Oman; instead, it brings its experienced Tour de France staff to run the day-to-day race operations. It's the same with RCS Sport, which provides technical support and expertise at Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

While Qatar is ideal for classics-bound riders, Oman and Dubai are gaining traction among GC contenders who are looking to stretch their legs at the dawn of a new season. From Europe, the Middle East races are closer—about a six-hour flight from Milan—than going to Australia for the Santos Tour Down Under or to Argentina for the Tour de San Luis.

And Oman boasts substantial climbs. It's not rare to see Chris Froome (Sky) or Tejay van Garderen (BMC Racing) racing hard in mid-February up its lonely desert ascents. Froome won the race in 2013 and 2014, while Robert Gesink (LottoNL-Jumbo) won in 2011.

## Rock stars

There should be little surprise why the racers enjoy racing in the Middle East. When Europe is still stuck under the gloom of winter, Oman, Dubai, and Qatar are roasting in the mid-80s.





DUBAI TOUR, 2015

Wide, smooth roads, great training facilities, and easy access from Europe make the region an ideal spot for early season training and racing.

"I would personally much prefer to race in Dubai or Oman, with good hotels and good weather, than somewhere in France in January or February," Sutherland says. "Logistically, they're great. You're in the same hotel, no transfers, and not too far from Europe. And the weather is usually very nice."

Riders are treated liked rock stars. Most fly business class on the flagship airlines (Air Qatar or Emirates Air) and stay in five-star accommodations. For years, the Tour of Qatar headquarters was in the luxurious Ritz-Carlton. At the Tour of Oman, the entire race retinue—riders, staff, sport directors, race personnel, and journalists—stays in a self-contained posh resort along the Persian Gulf, where each rider has his own private bungalow overlooking a manicured beach.

The race organizers have money to burn. For its debut, the Dubai tour flew in such sports luminaries as Formula 1 champion Fernando Alonso and soccer legend Diego Maradona to schmooze.

There's even talk of incorporating some of the Arab races into the WorldTour, in part to bridge the gap from the Tour Down Under in January and Paris-Nice in March. Abu Dhabi fills the autumn void left by the defunct Tour of Beijing.

"It would be reasonable to have one of them be WorldTour," Bookwalter says. "These economies offer so much to the cycling world. I think it would be a bit overboard to have two or three WorldTour races in that part of the world. One would be plenty right now."

## Follow the money

That cycling could become part of the quiver of events in the emerging Middle East shouldn't come as a surprise. Qatar has enough money that it created the Al Jazeera television station, hosted the 2006 Commonwealth Games, and has won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

In contrast to natural gas-rich Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates have far fewer natural resources. They have invested billions to diversify their economies away from complete dependency on oil and gas. Dubai, the Emirates' most popu-

lous city, has become the investment center of the region, with money pouring in from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia in the form of real estate, creating a Manhattan-like skyline.

Initially, the UAE looked on with envy as Qatar and Oman developed cycling events. Dubai wanted to host a "big start" for the Giro d'Italia, and something they felt would give them an upper hand on their neighbors. Instead, RCS Sport came back with a different idea.

"For the same amount of money, we told them they could build an entire race, with a lasting legacy, rather than a two- or three-day event just once," Giro director Mauro Vegni says. "It's an important investment for cycling in their country."

Why cycling? To put it simply, prestige. These emerging countries are looking to raise their international profile, not only with regard to natural resources and banking, but in sport as well.

They have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into sport facilities. Abu Dhabi hosts a stop on the Formula 1 circuit. There are major golf and tennis tournaments across the region, and Qatar invested hundreds of millions of dollars into Aspire Academy, its elite sport training facility.

All of these events and amenities build credibility. Without the Tour of Qatar, and the region's sporting integrity that has been bolstered over the past two decades, the 2022 World Cup might have landed elsewhere.

Now, an interesting thing is happening in places like Doha, Dubai, and Muscat. Feeding from the excitement of the elite professional races, there is a budding cycling scene.

Lelange has seen this firsthand. There's a Monday night criterium series in Doha that draws up to 100 racers. There's a busy regional racing calendar from October to April. The UAE even has its own Continental racing team, Sky-Dive Dubai.

"It's not like in Flanders, when kids are starting to ride a bike at two or three years old. But more and more people are riding their bikes," Lelange says. "We are sending our junior and under-23 riders to the UCI training center in Aigle. Our goal is to get them into the Olympics, and even into the European peloton. It will take time, but there is excitement here." ✓

## SPRINTERS' PARADISE?

Worlds in Qatar could be a flat, windy affair

Sprinters are salivating at the prospect of getting a shot at the rainbow jersey when Qatar hosts the world championships in 2016.

In what will be the first such worlds since Copenhagen in 2011, where Mark Cavendish and Giorgia Bronzini took gold medals, the peloton's fastest finishers will have a chance in Doha next October.

"It's good for the sprinters to have their chance to win the worlds," says John Lelange, the former BMC Racing sport director who now works with the Qatari cycling federation on the world championships.

"Just like climbers on some courses, or the classics specialists on others, I think it's nice for the sprinters to have a chance to win the rainbow jersey from time to time."

Lelange says the world championships will see the same support from the Qatari government as does the Tour of Qatar.

However, reports that the emir built an air-conditioned outdoor cycling track or a mountain out of the desert flats for the 2016 worlds are purely rumor, Lelange says.

"I have heard a lot of these stories," Lelange says with a laugh. "When I took this position, I told the emir, 'We don't have to build a mountain.' We have to take Qatar as it is. And for that, we mean wind."

The brunt of the worlds course—set to be officially unveiled during the Richmond worlds—will be held on a 19-kilometer urban circuit around the booming capital city of Doha. But Lelange insisted on adding a twist, and included a large loop across the desert for each road race before hitting the final circuits. The men could race up to 90km amid the wind-blasted sand dunes before reaching the downtown course.

"We don't have to do something different. It's like holding a worlds in the French Alps, and racing on flat roads," Lelange explains. "Let's make the wind the main ingredient. It will be very selective in the desert."

Being Belgian, Lelange described, with a touch of pride, what the final road course would look like: "We even found a small sector of pavé. Okay, it's not going to be like Flanders or Roubaix, but we have a nice, 1.2km sector of cobbles on each lap to make things interesting."



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# CYCLO KILLERS

The cyclocross course is the ultimate proving ground to test your mettle—and the equipment you ride

BY DAN CAVALLARI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRAD KAMINSKI

'Cross season has arrived, and you need a new bike. It has to be light enough not only for climbs but also for shouldering on slick, steep run-ups. And given the tight turns, off-camber slopes, and thick mud and sand just waiting to throw you off balance, you need something that's both steady and quick handling.

The bikes in our test weigh barely more than elite road bikes. Short chain stays get your weight over the rear wheel, and short head tubes allow you to stay low up front for quick, nimble handling. As counterintuitive as it may sound, wet, mucky conditions are where you get the most out of electronic shifting, since you don't have to worry about gunking up cables and housing. And, of course, now that you're allowed, make the leap to a bike with hydraulic disc brakes. For stopping power in wet or dirty conditions, rim brakes simply don't come close.



# NINER BSB 9 RDO \$6,500 18.0 lbs 56 cm ★★★★★

Despite Niner's claims that the BSB 9 RDO isn't a gravel bike, we couldn't help thinking that's what it would be best for. The aggressive riding position—long and generally low in the front end, with peppy 425mm chainstays—indicate that it's racecourse worthy. But the handling is sluggish compared to dedicated racers. If you race a bit but also want to do all-day gravel grinders, this is your bike. But if you're 100 percent dedicated to one or the other, look elsewhere.

**VALUE** We love the race-worthy Ultegra Di2 spec. You can't go wrong there. But the BSB 9 has a problem common to many Niners we've tested: a creaky press-fit bottom bracket. Normally we'd diagnose a need for maintenance, but creaky BBs have been a storyline for Niner in the past, and it doesn't seem to have been remedied here. Perhaps tighter tolerances in the shell would help, or reverting back to thread-in outboard bearings. (The latter is an option with adapters, but those adapters press in, so they may have the same creakiness problem.) Even the best bike is no fun if it's in the mechanic's workstand all the time. Problems like this shouldn't be common on a bike that costs several thousand dollars.

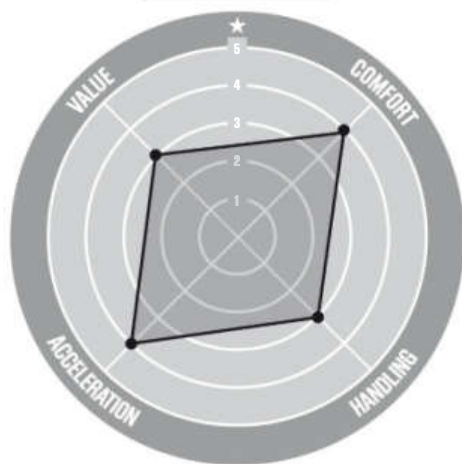
**COMFORT** No complaints here. The cockpit feels just right in terms of width, and the frame geometry has a race-inspired fit that still feels comfortable enough for hours-long grinds. Small bump chatter resonated through the frame occasionally, but on a 50-minute racecourse, you're not likely to notice.

**HANDLING** While the head tube angle measures 72 degrees, the fork feels like it has too much rake. The result is that the BSB 9 can feel a step behind in tight turns. It needs a bit of coaxing to really bullet out of the apex. This is less of a true racer and more of a race-worthy gravel bike.

**ACCELERATION** Considering how stiff the bottom bracket was in testing, we expected a bit more punch off the line. The Niner is no featherweight, which could contribute to its slow start, though factors like the flexy aluminum rims might have something to do with it. Throw some 30mm or 40mm carbon rims on for race day, and we'd be willing to bet the BSB 9 accelerates better than it did for us.

## OVERALL SCORES

TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TOTAL  
(MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS) 4.09



### WE DON'T LIKE

Creaky bottom bracket right out of the box

### WE LIKE

Very stiff bottom bracket for solid power transfer

A gravel-inspired ride moonlighting as a reliable racer



**FELT F1X** \$7,000 16.7 lbs 56cm ★★★★★

The F1X's exceptionally stiff bottom bracket—in the lab and on the trail—makes this bike a great choice for fast, non-technical courses where sprinting is at a premium. But it definitely oversteers enough that you might find yourself frustrated when fighting for the inside line. The 1X drivetrain, with a 40-tooth chainring and an 11-28 cassette, is great for racing. But if you're looking for something to handle long days of gravel grinding, get something with a wider gear range.

**VALUE** You can't go wrong with Dura-Ace Di2, but otherwise the parts spec is a bit off. We would swap out the wide handlebars (a possible contributor to the oversteer and sluggish handling we experienced) and the finicky seatpost. The notched adjustment system of the post tilts the nose either too high or too low, which is frustrating considering how simple this should be. The DT Swiss CXR1300db carbon clinchers wouldn't be our first choice, either. They are light and don't seem to flex much under hard pedaling and cornering, but a deeper rim would shed mud better.

**COMFORT** Excellent geometry makes for a comfortable ride, if low and long is your preferred body position. Depending on the rider's body

proportions, sizing down may be in order; a deceptively long top tube on this compact-looking bike can have you laid out more than you'd like on technical courses.

**HANDLING** The F1X feels longer than it appears, which may also be a contributing factor to the oversteer. This bike is at its best in a straight line.

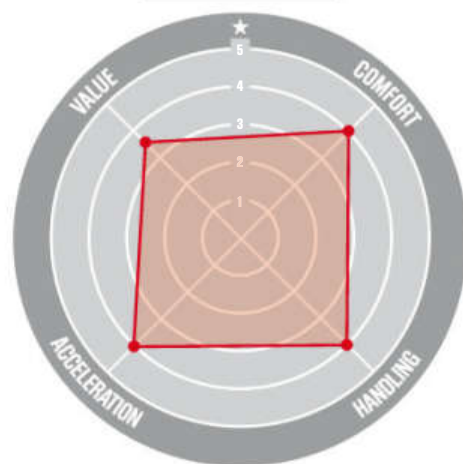
**ACCELERATION** It should be clear by now that this is where the F1X shines. In the lab, the frame has bottom-bracket and head-tube deflection numbers better than a lot of race-oriented road bikes. It's almost like a dirt-loving aero road bike.

**WE DON'T LIKE**

Seatpost is difficult to adjust

**OVERALL SCORES**

TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TOTAL  
(MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS) **5.44**



**Super stiff sprinter fine-tuned for fast courses**

**WE LIKE**

1X drivetrain is tailored to the racecourse





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The Critérium du Dauphiné is considered by many to be one of the best indicators of Tour de France success. Raced across many of the same roads it is a test not only for riders but also the equipment. Victory here can be a stepping stone to glory in July. The Cofidis Pro Cycling Team will be conquering those roads aboard the Kenda Kountach Endurance and Kriterium Endurance tires. Dual layer puncture protection and race tuned rubber compounds take the fear of the away, leaving the rest up to you . . .

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**KENDA**



**SANTA CRUZ STIGMATA** \$6,600 16.7 lbs 56cm ★★★★★

The Stigmata is very close to being a top performer. But a few quirks hold it back, including a flexy seat tube that contributes to sprinting sluggishness. It's light and agile, though, and it's particularly adept at ripping hard into tight switchbacks, thanks to design choices like short 425mm chainstays. At only 16.7 pounds, it's a 'cross racer's dream over barriers and muddy run-ups.

**VALUE** SRAM's Red drivetrain and brakes represent the best in the brand's lineup. It's not our first choice for 'cross, however. We prefer electronic systems, due to the more consistent shifting in mud. Nonetheless, this is a top-tier build, especially for this price.

**COMFORT** The tall head tube and wide cockpit translate into an upright riding position that may not be preferable for racing. It's comfortable, but it sacrifices some quickness in sprints because it positions the rider higher over the bottom bracket—not ideal when you're trying to leverage as much power out of the bike as possible. On the other hand, if you're riding gravel roads for hours on end, that cockpit, combined with the 160mm head tube (size 56cm), will be all-day comfortable.

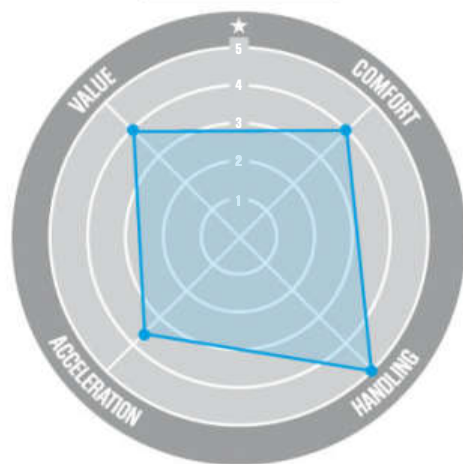
**HANDLING** The Stigmata excels on technical courses. Tight, point-and-go steering was confidence inspiring in tight switchbacks. You can thank a big 69mm bottom bracket drop that helps you leverage the frame in corners, thereby improving wheel tracking. The frame can accommodate tires up to 41mm in width, adding to the bike's versatility across disciplines and conditions.

**ACCELERATION** Those first few pedal strokes don't propel the Stigmata as well as they should. Perhaps this is due to the high deflection numbers our lab testing revealed in the seat tube, coupled with the shallow aluminum wheels that could be flexing under heavy pedaling. Santa Cruz offers a \$2,000 upgrade to Enve M series 50 Fifty wheels. That's a massive price increase, but we don't doubt it would help here. The 28mm rim depth would likely improve the Stigmata's stiffness woes. Better mud shedding from the deep profile rim wouldn't hurt, either.



**OVERALL SCORES**

TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TOTAL  
(MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS) 7.20



Quick-steering, ready to excel on technical courses



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AT#1248754





# SPECIALIZED CRUX PRO RACE \$5,200 18.3 lbs 56cm ★★★★★

Avoiding the cliché of being “just right” is tough with the Crux, because the bike does indeed feel just right. While it’s heavy compared to others in its class—by as much as two pounds—the Crux makes up for that with class-leading nimbleness on the race course. It’s clear Specialized thought about this bike with every aspect of racing in mind—from run-ups (comfortable curved top tube) to tight switchbacks (nimble handling and race-inspired cockpit), and even straightaway sprints (exceptional frame stiffness).

**VALUE** The Crux is spec’d with mechanical Shimano Ultegra, which keeps the price down versus both Dura-Ace and Ultegra Di2. For budget-conscious buyers who want race-proven performance, this is the way to go. We do think part of the Crux’s relative heft is a function of the cockpit, where Specialized has chosen less expensive components. We’d certainly go with lighter bars. But the tubeless-ready Roval Control Carbon wheels are a great addition at this price point.

**COMFORT** Surprisingly, the low deflection numbers in our stiffness test did not translate into harshness while in the saddle. The CG-R seatpost with Zertz vibration damping may have something to do with that. The bike runs true to size, and the cockpit feels race-inspired, with

narrow bars and a negative-rise stem complementing the short 155mm head tube.

**HANDLING** We didn’t oversteer once. Entering and exiting corners on the Crux is fun and natural. The stiff frame, solid carbon rims, and race-ready geometry (including 425mm chainstays and a 155mm head tube for a low, aggressive riding position) all combine for one of the best-handling ’cross bikes we’ve ridden.

**ACCELERATION** The Crux’s one glaring flaw, while not a fatal one, is sluggishness off the line. This is an exceptionally stiff bike, with a total deflection sum of less than 4mm, that should jump forward eagerly with those first few pedal strokes. Instead, it lags ever so slightly. We’ll chalk that up to the weight, again. That can certainly be addressed, though not on the cheap.

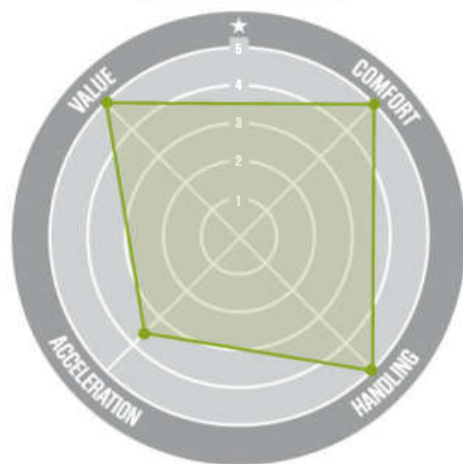


## WE LIKE

Arched top tube is comfortable when shouldering

## OVERALL SCORES

TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TOTAL  
(MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS) **3.33**



## WE DON'T LIKE

Build is heavy

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## TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TEST

### SANTA CRUZ

6.07

FELT 3.86  
SPECIALIZED 2.49  
NINER 2.97

.58 SANTA CRUZ  
.99 FELT  
.46 SPECIALIZED  
.89 NINER

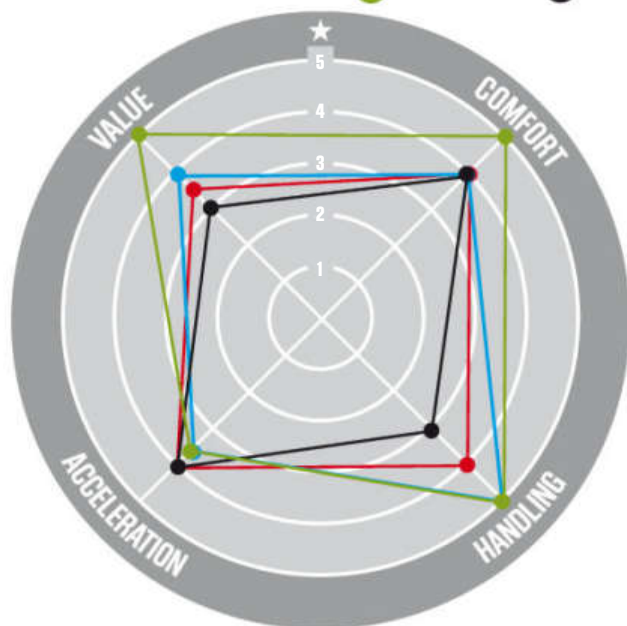
.55 SANTA CRUZ  
.58 FELT  
.38 SPECIALIZED  
.23 NINER

TORSIONAL STIFFNESS TOTALS  
(MEASURED IN MILLIMETERS)

SANTA CRUZ 7.20  
FELT 5.44  
SPECIALIZED 3.33  
NINER 4.09

## OVERALL SCORES

● SANTA CRUZ ● FELT  
● SPECIALIZED ● NINER



## THE BOTTOM LINE

The fight for the top spot in this test came down to the Stigmata and Crux. And the latter takes top honors. Ultimately it came down to the smarter build: The Crux is less expensive, has carbon wheels, and shifts better. Even though the Crux is almost two pounds heavier than the Santa Cruz, we'll take the weight penalty for something with crisper shifting and mud-shedding wheels that won't pick up additional weight with every lap.



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# GOING DEEP WITH MASSAGE

**New science on an old practice**

By Trevor Connor



**A**s a team manager, I could be a jerk. For example, my mechanic and I loved tricking gullible riders who obsessed over their cycling image with a game we called “do what the Euros do.” We’d tell them that European riders never opened windows at night, or ate raw pasta, or slept with plants in the room because they stole oxygen—just to see how stupid a thing we could get them to do. (Turns out, a lot.)

So much of what we do to become better cyclists has more to do with what we’ve seen other people do than with scientific evidence. Take the practice of massage: Every major team has a therapist on staff working daily on riders at the races. Pros on both sides of the Atlantic are willing to pay out of pocket for weekly treatments, and few question the benefits.

“It’s going to help you recover a little bit better,” says Eric Young (Optum-Kelly Benefit Strategies), a two time U.S. national champion. “It’s going to flush stuff out, move blood around. Those are good things for your muscles.”

But is there a real, measurable performance

benefit here, or is this another case of habit and assumption?

“All we have now is clinicians giving us their own personal impressions as opposed to any systematic study,” says Dr. Peter Tiidus, dean of applied health sciences at Canada’s Brock University.

Tiidus’ work on muscle damage and repair has included research into massage. In one controlled 12-week study, his team tested the effects of weekly massage on female recreational runners training for a 10-kilometer race, measuring claimed benefits like improved performance and perceived pain.

“Much to our surprise and disappointment, we saw absolutely no difference,” Tiidus says. “They reported the same amount of soreness, the same amount of pain, the same amount of beneficial effects of training adaptations.”

Among the presumed benefits of massage is that it increases blood flow, which would ostensibly mean more oxygen and faster removal of waste. Other believed benefits are improved muscle recovery and flushing of lactic acid to reduce

soreness. Unfortunately, in assessments of the current research, including a highly cited review by a team from New Zealand, the science simply isn’t there. Multiple studies using a variety of techniques to measure blood flow have found no difference. In fact, one study found that massage impedes blood flow by as much as 25 percent.

While Tiidus says some studies have measured small reductions in self-reported soreness, most human studies have found no improvement in muscle recovery.

Scientists have long since dismissed lactic acid as a villain. “We’ve known for a long time that lactic acid has absolutely nothing to do with muscle soreness,” says Tiidus. “Muscle soreness is an inflammatory response.” That inflammation is caused by the immune system responding to muscle damage and not by lactate.

Of course, absence of evidence isn’t evidence of absence. Perhaps researchers spent so much time chasing blood flow and lactic acid they’ve only now started to scratch the surface of the inflammation angle and massage’s role in it. “Maybe

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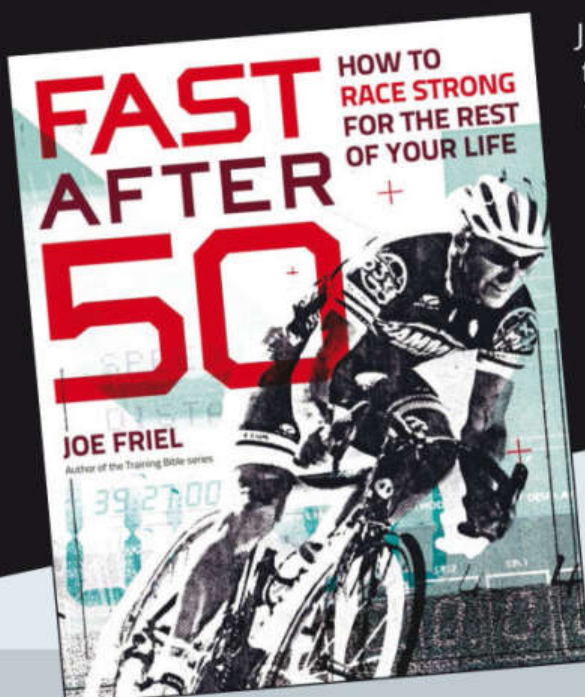
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there are things that we're not measuring that we should be measuring better," Tiidus says.

## INFLAMMATORY CLAIMS

A small but growing body of research suggests that researchers have been following the wrong leads. Tiidus points to two recent massage studies—one on rabbits and one on humans—indicating that massage's potential benefits may have something to do with inflammation.

When we train hard, we damage our muscles, and the immune system responds. White blood cells such as neutrophils and macrophages travel to the damaged tissue, where they release inflammatory chemicals, break down the damaged parts, and signal muscle repair. While this results in soreness, you want this inflammation, because without it the muscles can't rebuild.

But there can definitely be too much of a good thing.

"If you get too many neutrophils coming in, you cause secondary damage," Tiidus explains. "They start to injure some of the healthy tissue as well." On the flip side, blocking inflammation inhibits the repair process. So the trick is finding a happy medium.

In the rabbit study, massage reduced neutrophil and macrophage flow to the injured muscles by 53 and 70 percent, respectively. The massaged muscles were back to peak force after four days, a 119 percent improvement over the non-massaged controls.


The human study found that massage immediately after exercise shifts the balance in two key chemicals released by immune cells: NF- $\kappa$ B and PGC-1 $\alpha$ . The former slows muscle repair, while the latter controls inflammation and promotes the growth of mitochondria, which are our muscle's aerobic power plants.

Massage reduced NF- $\kappa$ B and increased PGC-1 $\alpha$ , promoting repair and preventing too much inflammation. The study was limited, however, in that it looked only at a period of 2.5 hours after training.

So clearly much more research needs to be done. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of money for massage research. And unless a big drug company can patent some form of deep-tissue manipulation, things will probably stay that way.

Based on our current knowledge, Tiidus says he wouldn't discourage massage. But if you're getting on fine without it, "I wouldn't necessarily recommend spending your \$60 per hour," he says.

Eric Young is equally pragmatic. "There are a thousand things that impact your performance and are important for recovery and racing," he says. "I think [massage] is just one more piece of the puzzle."

Sadly, until science catches up, you're going to have to decide for yourself. But feel free to hang onto your houseplants. 

# Work it like a Euro pro

When it comes to massage, keep in mind the old adage that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." No one has conclusively proven a benefit, but that doesn't mean you're wasting your time. (And they do feel nice.) Here are some tips for getting the most out of your sessions.

## TIME IT RIGHT

"When I'm really training hard, I'll add a massage because I want to make sure I'm recovering as fast as I can," Young says. And Tiidus agrees that heavy training may push us beyond that inflammatory threshold, where massage might be of the most help. So if you're going to get a rub down, the best time to do it is after hard workouts.

## SEE THE THERAPIST WHO'S ON TOP OF THE RESEARCH

You're not looking for incense and mood lighting. If a massage is going to help you, it will be in large part because it was delivered by someone who specializes in sport science and stays abreast of the literature on things like mechanotransduction (the process by which soft-tissue pressure and stretching promotes immune and biochemical responses). Ask for recommendations and interview different therapists. You're after something more akin to a medical treatment than a spa day.

## FIND A MIDDLE GROUND

Clearly you want more than gentle caressing. But, as Young points out, "if you're grabbing onto the table and crying, that's probably doing damage." One study on massage found that overly vigorous sessions increased muscle damage. It has also been shown that the degree of pressure has an impact on the balance between inflammation-promoting and repair-promoting macrophages.

## WORK YOUR WAY UP

Our veins have one-way valves that prevent blood from flowing in the wrong direction. Massaging against blood flow can damage these valves and cause varicose veins. Make sure the therapist works your arms and legs in the direction toward your heart.

## DON'T WAIT TOO LONG

The immunological benefits of massage appear to be greatest when treatment takes place within two hours of damaging exercise. If you can't fit one into that window, plan for no later than the next day. Macrophages shift from inflammatory to repair mode 48 hours after muscle damage occurs. Inhibiting them with massage when they're in this mode could be counterproductive.

## MIND THE PILLS

The same rules apply to painkillers. NSAIDs like acetaminophen and ibuprofen block inflammation, which can be good or bad, depending on where your balance is at. While researchers still debate their effects on training, there is growing evidence. This includes a well-cited study from Denmark in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, showing that NSAIDs taken post-exercise by male endurance athletes inhibit satellite cell activity, which is critical to muscle repair and super-compensation.

## DON'T IGNORE THE OTHER STUFF

Massage doesn't replace

things like cool downs, recovery rides, and stretching—all of which are backed by extensive research. In fact, a 1983 study out of Sweden published in the *American Journal of Sports Medicine* found that stretching was more effective for recovery and range of motion than massage in healthy male volunteers.

## BUT DON'T EXERCISE AFTER MASSAGE

No study has found benefits to pre-workout massage. Hard exercise does further damage and would undo any potential immunological gains from massage.

## YES, USE YOUR FOAM ROLLER

The rabbit study that found benefits to muscle repair used a mechanical massager that was more like a foam roller than a regular massage. (Apologies if you were envisioning lab assistants pampering rabbits on little bunny massage tables.) Two recent studies showed that foam rolling reduces soreness and allows runners to restore their full sprint speed sooner. Higher density foam with bevels appears to increase the effects.

## TUNE OUT

Physiological benefits or not, there's no denying a massage can be good for the soul. "Sometimes it's just nice to sit there and force yourself to think about the race," Young says. (We also like thinking about nothing at all.)



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# Riding the rail

For those who follow cycling, the “everything is better now” afterglow of the U.S. Postal scandal has been short lived. For a sport low on credibility to begin with, cycling hasn’t done much to help its situation in recent months. Case in point: Cannondale-Garmin, the sport’s most publicized “clean team,” turned up the first positive test in its history, when Tom Danielson was nabbed for synthetic testosterone use.

And just when it seemed that things couldn’t get any more embarrassing, along came Team Astana.

In August, the scandal-plagued team threw its last remaining shame to the wind and literally drove Vincenzo Nibali up the road after a crash in the Vuelta a España. Nibali didn’t get in the car, mind you, but he may as well have, as team director Alexander Sheffer zoomed away from a sizable chase group with his team leader in tow.

We’ve all seen the ol’ sticky bottle trick, but this was something more—a prolonged tow so egregious that race organizers took the unusual step of expelling both Nibali and Sheffer. Apologizing on Facebook, Nibali acknowledged his mistake but questioned the severity of his pun-

ishment, suggesting he was neither the first, nor likely the last, to employ the tactic.

But it was Astana team manager Giuseppe Martinelli who really took the cake in the hours that followed. Speaking of the illegal tow—during which he was sitting beside Sheffer—Martinelli noted, “It happens all the time in the Tour. I’ve seen it a thousand times. Try to find me an honest person in the peloton. Any sport director would have done the same thing to save their leader.”

Not a single honest person in the peloton? Sorry Giuseppe, but I’m going to have to call bullshit on that one. Despite the sport’s many flaws, I can’t believe—won’t believe—that Astana is the model on which cycling is built in 2015. As we approach 2016, let me offer a new and improved vision for our sport: a world without the Kazakhstani squad.

How many years do we have to continue pretending that Astana is going to change? I know cycling is filled with unwritten rules, but does “300 strikes and you’re out” really have to be one of them? Alexander Vinokourov and his crew have been a blight upon the sport since the team’s first days. And I mean that literally.

Formed in 2007, the team hadn’t been in operation for four months when German Matthias Kessler became the squad’s first doping positive. Three months later, Astana was “invited to withdraw” from its debut Tour de France after Vinokourov was revealed to have received a blood transfusion. With a first year like that, it’s a wonder the team was permitted to continue at all.

But somehow the hits have just kept on coming. From Vino’s alleged purchase of Liège-Bastogne-Liège to five recent doping positives and the mysterious abduction of Vincenzo Nibali, if there is one red thread that ties together the history of Astana, it is cheating.

So why are we here some eight years later still permitting these chronic reprobates to stain the worldwide reputation of cycling, particularly when Pro Team licenses are based, in part, on ethical criteria? That’s a question that only the UCI can answer.

But if Martinelli really can’t find a single honest person in the peloton, then maybe it’s time we make a change and begin by throwing him and the rest of his corrupt buddies out of it.

The time to yank Astana’s license has come and gone at least eight times too many. Here’s hoping 2016 doesn’t make it nine. **V**

Dan Wuori maintains a running list of honest people in the peloton. Follow him on Twitter at @dwwuori.

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